The Salmon of Knowledge in Irish Literature; a Scholarly Concept

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Abstract:

The salmon of knowledge is generally regarded by Celticists as an established and widely referenced concept. However, when reviewing the extent medieval texts, it becomes clear that the salmon of knowledge is only a widely referenced concept in scholarly literature, not medieval literature. The concept of the salmon of knowledge has been exaggerated by scholars. After reviewing a corpus of thirteen medieval Irish texts it becomes clear that there is very little evidence for the existence of a medieval concept of the salmon of knowledge. A Salmon is also frequently associated with other qualities, such as heroism. Moreover, other elements within the concept of the salmon of knowledge, such as the nuts of *imbas*, seem to be more closely connected with knowledge than salmon. This thesis would encourage scholars to reconsider the concept of the salmon of knowledge. To let go of the immediate association between salmon and knowledge will allow us to better interpret the appearance of salmon in Medieval Irish texts.

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Introduction:

One of the motifs included in Tom Peete Cross' *The Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature* is the salmon of knowledge.[1] Cross' book, a supplement to the Aarne-Thompson index, addressed the lack of Irish material therein.[2] Thompson himself did include the salmon of knowledge motif in the revised edition of his *Motif-index of Folk-literature* using Cross' suggestion as a reference.[3] On the basis of the entries into these motif-indexes a scholar researching Irish stories might assume that the salmon of knowledge is a common concept. Cross even has plentiful references to support the existence of the concept of a salmon of knowledge.[4] However, these references for his entry mostly refer to scholarly literature, not any stories from Irish literature itself. As this thesis will show, that is because in medieval Irish literature the evidence for a salmon of knowledge is remarkably lacking.

This might be a surprise to Celtic scholars who have seen the salmon of knowledge reappear often in scholarly works. I myself began this thesis trying to better understand this concept of a salmon of knowledge because I had seen so many scholars referencing it. Because no comprehensive work on the salmon of knowledge had been written I set out to write it myself. I had heard this fascinating term and I wanted to understand it. Yet, as I read and reviewed the medieval material, I was struck by the lack of evidence for the salmon of knowledge in medieval sources, even in the texts that were usually part of the established explanation for the concept. As such, the trajectory of this thesis shifted. Now this thesis aims to show and prove that there is significantly less evidence for the salmon of knowledge then what is currently assumed by Celticists. The hypothesis of this thesis is that despite the fact that the salmon of knowledge as a concept is widely established in scholarly literature, it is not a concept that is widely attested in medieval Irish literature. The discrepancy between these two literary traditions creates the opportunity for misguided interpretations of the medieval texts.

Miranda Green gives a summary of how the salmon of knowledge and its origin are commonly understood:

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[1] Cross 1952, p.59.
[2] Cross 1952, p.vii.
[3] Thompson 1955, p.380.
[4] Cross 1952, p.59. Including the editorial notes on *Cormac's Glossary* by O'Donovan 1868 and O'Rahilly's *Early Irish History and Mythology* first published in 1946.

> "the Salmon of Wisdom, a creature who appears in both Welsh and Irish myths. In the 'Tale of Culhwch and Olwen', he is known as the Salmon of Llyn Llyw, one of the oldest beings on earth. […] The concept of the Salmon of Wisdom or Knowledge is further developed in an Insular legend concerning the hero Finn. In the story, Finn comes across the bard Finnegas, who has been fishing for the Salmon for seven years, in a pool. As Finn arrives, the bard catches the fish and gives it to Finn to cook, bidding him on no account to taste the fish. But Finn burns his thumb on the hot flesh and puts it in his mouth: he begins instantly to acquire knowledge; Finnegas then gives him the fish to eat and Finn becomes infinitely wise. The Salmon itself, we are told, acquired its omniscience by eating the nuts of the nine hazel trees growing beside a well at the bottom of the sea. The implication must be that this wisdom comes from the chthonic, underworld regions".[5]

This passage presents two stories from the core of the salmon of knowledge legend, the *Macgnímartha Find* and the Dindshenchas of Sinann.[6] Green has already given a succinct description here of the passage in the *Macgnímartha Find* where Finn gains knowledge after burning his finger on the salmon of knowledge. The relevant story of Sinann has not been summarized yet. To summarize: A woman named Sinann went in search of the knowledge from an otherworldly well. At this well there was a hazel tree with nuts of *imbas* (knowledge). These nuts dropped into the well and the salmon in the well below chewed on the nuts. Sinann went to the water to try and obtain wisdom but drowned in the attempt. The river that resulted from this attempt is named the Shannon in her memory.

Including these two tales, this thesis has a corpus of 13 editions of medieval texts. All the tales in this corpus have been used by scholars in discussions on the salmon of knowledge, though not all include salmon. I have divided these tales in three different categories along thematic lines. The first category includes all tales that feature a well of knowledge: the *Macgnímartha Find*, [7] the *Acallam na*

[5] Green 1993, p.191.
[6] *Macgnímartha* edition: Meyer "Macgnímartha Find" 1882, translation Meyer "The Boyish Exploits of Finn" 1904. Dindshenchas editions and translations: Gwynn *The Metrical Dindshenchas* 1903, Stokes "the prose tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas" 1894, Stokes "The Bodleian dinnshenchas" 1892.
[7] Edition Meyer "Macgnímartha Find" 1882. Translation Meyer "The Boyish Exploits of Finn" 1904.

Senórach (*Acallam*)[8], the *Metrical Dindshenchas*[9], the *Bodleian Dindshenchas*[10], the *Rennes Dindshenchas*[11], *Echtra Cormaic i Tír Tairngiri* (*Tir Tairngiri)*[12], *Comrac Con Culainn re Senbecc (Senbecc)*[13]. The second category, the "old salmon", includes all the tales which are said to contain the motif of the "oldest animal"[14]: *The Colloquy between Fintan and the Hawk of Achill* (*The Hawk of Achill*)[15], *Scél Tuán meic Cairill do Finnen Maige Bile* (*Scél Tuan*)[16], *Feis tighe Conain* (*Feis*)[17], *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (*Lebor Gabála*)[18]. Lastly, there is the category of "miscellaneous tales" that do not necessarily have any overlapping themes with the previous stories, but are also brought up by scholars in relation to the salmon of knowledge: *Cóir Anmann*[19], *Tochmarc Moméra* (*Moméra*)[20].

This corpus is based on the tales from late medieval Ireland that scholars use to discuss the salmon of knowledge, and reflects the aim of this thesis to study medieval Irish texts. Therefore, I have not included any texts from outside of Ireland or the medieval period in the main corpus, though we will address these texts when relevant. Moreover, only texts with relevance to the discussions of wisdom or knowledge are included.[21] However, we will review certain tales that are often referenced in discussions on the salmon of knowledge that do not feature salmon.

The period of literature which this thesis focusses on is middle to late Medieval Irish literature, from 900 to 1500. All the texts in our corpus have been attested in manuscripts from this period. Because the dating of these texts cannot be precise, and some texts have not been dated at all, chronological precedence will be given to the manuscripts in which these texts are found. Table 1 in the Appendix also

[8] Edition Stokes "Acallamh na senórach" 1900. Translation Dooley and Roe *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* 1999.
[9] Edition and translation Gwynn *The Metrical Dindshenchas* 1913.
[10] Edition and translation Stokes "The Bodleian dinnshenchas" 1892.
[11] Edition and translation Stokes "The prose tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas" 1894.
[12] Edition and translation Stokes "The Irish ordeals, Cormac's adventure in the Land of the Promise, and the decision as to Cormac's sword" 1891.
[13] Edition and translation Meyer "Irish miscellanies: Anecdota from the Stowe MS. n° 992" 1870.
[14] We will further explore this motif in chapter 2 and chapter 6.
[15] This poem does not have an Irish title and will thus be referred to by the English title. The poem begins with the lines: *Arsaidh sin, a eoúin Accla.* Runge 2020, I. Edition and translation by Hull "The hawk of Achill or the legend of the oldest animal" 1932, and Runge "The colloquy between Fintan and the Hawk if Achill" 2020.
[16] Edition and translation Meyer "Appendix A. Tuan mac Cairill's story to Finnen of Moville" 1897.
[17] Edition Joynt "Feis Tighe Chonáin" 1936. Translation O'Kearney "Feis tighe Conain Chinn-Shleibhe" 1855.
[18] Edition and translation Macalister *Lebor Gabála Érenn: The boof of the taking of Ireland* 1932-1942.
[19] Edition and translation Stokes "Cóir anmann" 1891.
[20] Edition and translation O'Curry *Cath Mhuige Léana* 1855.
[21] How other aspects of the salmon function in Irish literature is something we will come back to in chapter 4.

shows the order and date of the various texts and manuscripts in our corpus.[22] This table can help navigate these dates but should be taken with a grain of salt as early texts can appear in late manuscripts.

The manuscript order is most relevant here because of the level at which we will be studying these texts. We are analysing most of these texts on very specific word contexts. For many texts in our corpus we are sometimes only concerned with one or two sentences as a reference to salmon.[23] These specific words or sentences usually do not have an impact on the context or plot of a story, and are not at all sure to be consistent with earlier versions of a tale nor will they be resistant to adaptations. [24] When a story is copied into a new manuscript certain words or phrases are susceptible to change even when an entire text may be stable. [25] We cannot be sure that, even if the writing appears to be older, the exact wording of the text would also reflect the text as it was supposedly first written.[26] The use of these singular phrases in general arguments about the salmon of knowledge is what makes many of these arguments tentative. Scholars might use a singular phrase from a late edition to characterize an entire body of early literature. As such, the period in which we find the text first attested is considered as the primary order for our purposes.

As we can see from Table 1 in the Appendix, the oldest tale in our corpus, both in manuscript appearance and text date, is *Scél Tuan* from the tenth or eleventh century. *Feis Tighe Conain* is our youngest text. *Feis* might be a slightly questionable addition to our corpus, as the earliest full version of this text is not found until 1684.[27] The translation we have is based on an even later edition.[28] What qualifies this text for our corpus is the fact that the beginning of this text is found in a manuscript from c.1500, although it contains no salmon passages.[29] Because there is evidence of this story within the timeframe of this thesis it is included, unlike a text such as *The Adventures of Leithin,* which is presumably late medieval, but not found until the 18th century.[30] There is evidence for a similar story in

[22] P.105-106 below.
[23] The *Lebor Gabála* is an example of this.
[24] Nichols 2011, p.24.
[25] Nichols 2011, p.2.
[26] Mortensen 1995, p.266-267.
[27] Joynt 1936, p.iv.
[28] Joynt 1936, p.iii.
[29] Joynt 1936, p.iii.
[30] Hyde 1914-1916, p.116.

medieval texts because it is alluded to in *The Hawk of Achill*.[31] However, the text of the extant manuscript is also quite modern and not medieval. There are too many questions surrounding this text for it to be included in this corpus. *Feis,* however, does just barely fit into the criteria of our corpus as a text which is attested before 1500 and used in discussions on the salmon of knowledge. Though, when discussing it we must keep in mind that the text is very late. Nonetheless, I do believe it serves an important function in closing the ranks of our corpus as an illustration of what the concept of the salmon of knowledge might have looked like at the end of the medieval period.

There is no text in our corpus, nor that of the wider medieval Irish literature, that is a specific explanation about how the salmon of knowledge got its knowledge or where the salmon of knowledge originates. We barely even find any salmon in our corpus referred to as the salmon of knowledge. We might then question why these stories are connected to the salmon of knowledge. This is because of previous scholarship, where the salmon of knowledge is often addressed briefly as if it were a fully attested concept. For example, Noémie Beck writes:

> "The motif of the 'Salmon of Knowledge' is widely referred to in Irish tradition. By eating its flesh, enlightenment could be obtained, for the salmon had fed on the mystical nuts falling from the hazels into the source of the Boyne, as Cormac's Adventure in the Land of Promise […] indicates".[32]

Yet, the salmon is only widely referred to in scholarly literature, not medieval Irish literature.

The salmon may be the most studied fish in Celtic literature.[33] As we have seen from the examples above, most of this scholarship presents the salmon of knowledge as an established motif. This idea of the salmon of knowledge is not recent and was already championed by early Celtic Scholars such as Whitley Stokes and Eugene O'Curry.[34] The salmon of knowledge has often been included in general discussions on knowledge and wisdom in Irish literature. Patrick Ford, for example, discusses the implications of the well of wisdom as well as the connection of a salmon with said well in relation

[31] Hyde 1914-1916, p.117.
[32] Beck 2015, p.290.
[33] Petrovskaia 2018, p.142.
[34] O'Curry 1855, p.97 and Stokes "The prose tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas" 1894, p.457.

to wisdom symbolism in Irish and Indo-European literature.[35] Sharon MacLeod addresses a similar discussion in her article "A Confluence of Wisdom: The Symbolism of Wells, Whirlpools, Waterfalls and Rivers".[36]

Much of the scholarship surrounding the salmon of knowledge is also connected to Fenian scholarship. There are plenty of articles on Finn that address the salmon of knowledge, for example, Robert Scott's "The Thumb of Knowledge in Legends of Finn, Sigurd, and Taliesin".[37] Joseph Nagy, in *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, has also discussed the relationship between Fenian literature and the salmon of knowledge.[38] Nagy has similarly addressed the salmon of knowledge in some of his other writings, in his "Otter, Salmon, and Eel in Traditional Gaelic Narrative" or his "Liminality and Knowledge in Irish literature", for example.[39] Still, the salmon has not been centre stage in any of these works. Rather, the salmon of knowledge is presented as a piece of existing evidence to support other theories.[40]

Nagy, however, is not preoccupied with the idea that the salmon of knowledge is a sacred fish of knowledge. In that respect he has a moderate view of the concept. This is in contrast to scholars such as Anne Ross, who say that the salmon of knowledge: "is known as *eó fis*, 'salmon of wisdom', and many legends refer to the sacred salmon'.[41] Like many other scholars, Ross refers back to Thomas O'Rahilly.[42] O'Rahilly is among several scholars who associate the salmon of knowledge with a multitude of figures from Irish literature, such as Fintan, the Dagda, and Cú Chulainn.[43] Eleanor Hull, before O'Rahilly, has also connected the character of Fintan to the salmon of knowledge and proposes that *The Hawk of Achill* is an example of the motif of "the oldest animal".[44] This motif is also often used to identify a passage in the Welsh tale *Cullwch ac Olwen* with the salmon of knowledge.[45] The age of the salmon in this story is one of the elements that supposedly connects the salmon to knowledge.

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[35] Ford 1974.
[36] MacLeod 2006.
[37] Scott 1930, p.xvii.
[38] Nagy *The Wisdom of The Outlaw* 1985, p.137.
[39] Nagy "Otter, Salmon and Eel in Traditional Gaelic Narrative" 1985-86 and Nagy "Liminality and Knowledge in Irish Literature" 1981.
[40] An example of this is Loki's connection to Irish tradition discussed by Nagy "Otter, Salmon and Eel", p.138-139.
[41] Ross 1968, p.350-351.
[42] Ross 1968, p.350.
[43] O'Rahilly 1971, p.318.
[44] E. Hull 1932, p.379
[45] Green 1993, p.190. see also p.4 above.

More natural aspects of the salmon, outside of knowledge and wisdom, have been discussed by A.J. Hughes and Natalia Petrovskaia. In his article "Some aspects of the salmon in Gaelic tradition past and present", Hughes discusses how the salmon is used in Irish and Scottish bardic poetry and he touches on the different qualities a salmon can represent.[46] As such his focus is not on any salmon of knowledge. Rather, it casts a wider net to discuss all different manners of the metaphoric use of salmon in poetry, mostly focusing on salmon as a symbol of warriors and strength. Petrovskaia's focus is largely on the natural aspects of salmon in Irish literature as opposed to elements of knowledge.

Most of this scholarship represents the salmon of knowledge as an established motif where the relation between salmon and knowledge is not questioned in depth. The salmon of knowledge is considered integral to Irish literature. Yet, despite the scholarly debate saying otherwise, the salmon of knowledge is only scarcely attested in medieval Irish literature. It may even be the case that there was no medieval concept of the salmon of knowledge. To prove this hypothesis this thesis will not only discuss the medieval literature text within the corpus, the scholarly debate will also be looked at in detail.

In chapter two this thesis will present the plots of the texts in our corpus, and I will discuss how these different tales connect. We may then conclude what evidence connecting salmon with knowledge is actually present in Irish literature, apart from the scholarly debate. As we will see in this chapter, the evidence is less than previously assumed. In chapter three we will take an in-depth look at some specific words used in our stories. This discussion on words will give us an insight into the concepts of knowledge and wisdom that we are discussing. It will help to contextualize what type of knowledge was relevant in Irish culture and for what reason. With this information we will have a better understanding of what type of knowledge is referred to in these texts and how to interpret this knowledge. In the fourth chapter we will then look at other aspects of the salmon beside knowledge and wisdom. This will give us a wider understanding of what a salmon might have represented in Irish literature apart from wisdom before we move to our next chapter. The next chapter, "Surprisingly Little Material", discusses and reviews the evidence scholars have previously given for the salmon of knowledge. Working from the presented hypothesis that the actual evidence of a salmon of knowledge is lacking in medieval literature,

[46] Hughes 1996.

we will also ask why scholars believe the concept is more established than it actually is. It will become apparent that much of these assumptions stem from previous scholarship and are built upon editions and suggestions from scholars such as Stokes. Next, we will consider what other influences outside of Ireland might have impacted the concept of a salmon of knowledge in Ireland. Chapter six will address connections brought up by scholars in the past, but it will also suggest that Christianity is an influence on the concept of the salmon of knowledge that we should consider. From this chapter we will learn that connections often made to literature outside of Ireland in support of the existence of a salmon of knowledge do not in fact prove its existence in Irish literature. Lastly, we will look at other elements from Irish literature that have connections to knowledge. This chapter aims to show that the salmon of knowledge was not an especially important or unique marker of knowledge in Irish literature and culture. Before we move to all that though, we must first address some technical aspects of this study.

1. Methodology, Terminology, and Theoretical Framework:

Before we move any further there are some technical considerations, such as terminology and methodology that need to be addressed. We shall start with the methodology of this thesis. The principal aim of this thesis to go back to the sources is grounded in the notions of philology.[47] Siegfried Wenzel identifies philology in the widest sense as: "an appreciative attraction to verbal documents that seeks to understand their meaning, starting with the surface and penetrating to whatever depths are possible, but also alert to the fact that a given text comes from and is shaped by a specific time and place that usually is significantly different from that of the observer".[48] According to John Koch, Celtic studies has a rich and enduring philological tradition mostly focussed on the historical and comparative study of language.[49]

Unlike some of the earlier philologists, I mostly use previously made editions to interpret texts instead of editing the texts myself.[50] I have studied the Irish in these editions, but I am aware of the fact that this Irish is reliant on the interpretation of the editor. Only on certain occasions have I studied the original manuscript sources. This is not quite in line with the new philology movement where the manuscript itself, the layout and illumination, are also major contributors to a study.[51] However, this thesis does follow the theories of new philology which acknowledge and emphasize variation in texts.[52] It is this exact variation in each different text, edition, and manuscript that is providing us with answers about the concept of the salmon of knowledge. In other words, the value of the text lies "in a plenitude of meanings".[53] As such the focus of this thesis will also not be on trying to define or discover any original incarnation of the concept of the salmon of knowledge in any *ur-text*.[54] We will, however, remain somewhat in the realm of old philology as there are only a handful of occasions where manuscript context will be relevant in the arguments below.[55]

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[47] Nichols 1990, p.2.
[48] Wenzel 1990, p.12.
[49] Koch 1990, p.31.
[50] Nichols 1990, p.3.
[51] Yager 2010, p.999.
[52] Nichols 1990, p.6.
[53] Yager 2010, p.1003.
[54] Fleischman 1990, p.25.
[55] For example, we will address the illumination in the Book of Kells in Chapter 4 and 6.

As Yager has said: "This reuniting of the painstaking work of philologists with the creative work of critics has made the New Philology a significant informing principle of the discipline of Medieval Studies".[56] It is this intersection between history, textual analysis, and literary criticism that makes New Philology so valuable for this thesis. The use of the methods of philology in this thesis also connects with the other major contributor to the framework of this thesis, literary studies. That is because this thesis will be more focussed on how culture has shaped texts, and why the Irish culture might have produced texts with a salmon of knowledge, rather than on notions of how texts have shaped culture.[57] In other words: "The social construction of meaning in historically determinate discourses".[58] Therefore, I will be utilising the approaches from literary studies to interpret our corpus.

One of the tools of literature studies we will be using is literary analysis through close reading.[59] This close reading will help to establish what a certain passage means and represents in isolation without necessarily identifying the role of any elements in a wider corpus. This will allow the text to convey a meaning that stands on its own, independent of any previous interpretation made by scholars. This will help to determine whether the salmon that appears in certain texts is actually representative of knowledge, or whether the salmon is only interpreted as a salmon of knowledge in light of a supposed wider corpus of existing salmon of knowledge. This thesis also moves beyond the tool of close reading. I will also discuss the approaches from folklore studies, comparative literature, and the cultural turn, that other scholars have used in their discussions on the Irish texts in our corpus.[60]

Working from a philological perspective, this thesis will be reviewing not only the plot of the text but also the wording of the texts and the culture or cultural beliefs that influenced the text. I will look at the cultural contexts of these texts within the wider perspective of medieval Irish culture. Thus, this thesis uses literary analysis with notions from the cultural turn. The cultural turn has encouraged cultural analysis in different academic fields.[61] This cultural turn has been influenced by notions from the field of cultural anthropology, which provided ideas to other disciplines for the study of cultural

[56] Yager 2010, p.1006.
[57] Spiegel 1990, p.60.
[58] Spiegel 1990, p.64.
[59] Jordan and Weedon 2006, p.246.
[60] This will be discussed further below in the chapter 6. Patrick Ford 1974, is one example of this.
[61] Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut 2016, p.4.

otherness and plurality.[62] To quote Doris Bachmann-Medick and Adam Blauhut, the cultural turn allowed researchers: "to identify how and in which processes and culture-specific manifestations intellectual and cultural goods are produced in society as a whole. This approach resulted in an interdisciplinary practice of cultural research that fostered a pluralization instead of a unification of meanings, attitudes, and modes of perception and articulation"[63] In literary studies and history, cultural anthropology became an important influence on how one could study the cultural habits present in the historical and literary sources.[64]

Literary scholars and historians alike have been using the cultural turn to interpret sources in the light of a cultural analysis.[65] However, when studying medieval texts, we must acknowledge that sometimes the texts we study largely make up the cultural context we have for societies, as the only ways for these societies to express their views to us are within the texts. In other words: "historiography is able to catch a glimpse of human experience only to the extent that historical documents permit it to do so".[66] These texts are not only part of a web of cultural elements, they are sometimes our anker points for the evidence of a culture. Thus, we must remember that while we want to study the cultural context we only have a limited cultural context to apply to these texts.

Some of the developments and evolutions of the cultural turn will appear in different sections of this thesis. For example, according to Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut it is also from the developments in the cultural turn that concepts such as liminality were born.[67] This concept of liminality, which is widely used in folklore studies, is also often used in the interpretation of the stories of the salmon of knowledge.[68] We will come across this concept again in chapter 3 below. Moreover, the "reflexive turn" has provided room for scholars to reflect on their own body of writing and the way scholarly writing can present and create concepts.[69] We will use parts of the reflexive turn in chapter 5 as well, when we discuss why scholars believe in the existence of a salmon of knowledge.

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[62] Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut 2016, p.18.
[63] Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut 2016, p.4.
[64] Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut 2016, p.18-19.
[65] Rubin 2006, p.104.
[66] Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut 2016, p.22.
[67] Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut 2016, p.25.
[68] Nagy "Liminality and Knowledge in Irish Tradition*"* 1981, p.140.
[69] Bachmann-Medick and Blauhut 2016, p.25.

Theory from the cultural turn almost serves as the intersection of literature studies and folklore studies as it reflects on the culture present in literature, and how those two interact. Folklore studies and Celtic studies have long since been connected.[70] This is not too strange considering they both originated from the same romantic movements, and both attempted to document the stories of the common folk. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin also suggests that, for Ireland at least, folklore has connotations between the old, residual, stories of the "traditional" Irish speaking culture.[71] As such folklore is more than just a part of Irish culture, in some ways traditional Irish culture and folklore are synonyms. Folklore allows for many facets of the "folk" or the "lore" it studies, and scholars have emphasized how hard the term is to define.[72] Folklore studies is an intersection between several fields of study, it includes geography, history, archaeology, literature studies, and anthropology. Joseph Szövérffy has previously put forth the notion that many motifs from folklore find their origin in medieval literature.[73] Szövérffy believes that a direct connection can be made between motifs in medieval stories and modern folklore.[74] He even goes so far as to say: "In Irish folklore we cannot come to any lasting conclusion without a detailed and profound knowledge of not only medieval Irish literature but also the general common tradition of the Middle Ages".[75] Thus, in its study of medieval stories, folklore studies can overlap in many ways with literature studies and medieval studies. For the purposes of this research, folklore studies is the study of the stories that are part of a cultural corpus.

In the study of folklore a comparative approach is often used. This comparative approach is similar to comparative literature studies. A comparative approach is useful to look at how stories function in relation to culture and how different influences on culture influence stories. Comparative literature is somewhat self-explanatory since it is the practice of comparing two different literature traditions with one another, often of a different linguistic tradition.[76] The practice of comparing literary sources with one another closely links comparative literature with other literature studies. According to

[70] Wood 1999, p.3.
[71] Ó Giolláin 2000, p.2.
[72] Ó Giolláin 2000, p.2.
[73] Szövérffy 1960, p.239.
[74] Szövérffy 1960, p.240.
[75] Szövérffy 1960, p.241.
[76] Tötösy de Zepetnek 1998, p.13.

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek it is generally accepted that comparative literature studies allows for the comparative study of culture.[77] This notion also implies that literature and culture run parallel to one another. Tötösy de Zepetnek even claims that much of modern cultural studies operates in similar ways to the comparativist study of literature.[78] We will come across this comparative approach on several occasions, mostly as other scholars use Celtic literature in studies of comparative literature.[79]

Within folklore studies this comparative approach also includes the index of stories such as the Aarne–Thompson Index and the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature.[80] For the study of folklore the Aarne-Thompson index, and the identified tale types and motifs contained therein, is one of the most important tools.[81] Scholars have used certain motifs and tale-types within this index, such as the "The White Serpent's flesh" to interpret the stories of the salmon of knowledge.[82] In chapter 6 we will come across these interpretations again. This index of folklore tales is also not simply concerned with just one time period or region but with the repetition and reappearance of motifs across time and space. The motifs in this index should not be considered in simple isolation, they are often used in combination with each other to give meaning to a complete tale.[83] This is similar to Claude Levi-Straus' ideas of how motifs interact to create and shift meaning.[84] The descriptions of these motifs are very general and very specific at the same time, they are not absolute and how they exactly play out varies from tale to tale.[85] In this index there is also a difference between a tale type and a motif, similar tale types are considered to be related, but similar motifs may appear in completely unrelated tales.[86]

Tools and practices of folklore studies, such as the Aarne-Thompson index, make folklore studies well equipped to study a larger body of texts that are not directly connected.[87] Furthermore, the contextual approach of folklore studies will be useful for this thesis. This contextual approach is

[77] Tötösy de Zepetnek 1999, p.2.
[78] Tötösy de Zepetnek 1999, p.2.
[79]We will address these comparisons in chapter 6.
[80] Aarne and Thompson *The Types of Folktale* 1964, Thompson *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* 1998.
[81] Dundes 1997, p.195.
[82] Scott 1930 p.178.
[83] Dundes 1997, p.196.
[84] Lévi-Strauss 1981, 70-71
[85] Dundes 1997, p.196-197.
[86] Dundes 1997, p.197.
[87] Wood 1999, p.10.

regarded as an interaction between audience, author, and culture.[88] To understand the function and the meaning of an interaction one must look at its full cultural context. Therefore, the approaches and tools of folklore studies will be useful for this thesis, and it seems fitting to use the perspectives of folklore studies to examine repeating elements in this larger body of texts.

Lastly, we must also sort out some terminology, the first of which being "salmon of knowledge" or "salmon of wisdom". In the introduction it has already become clear that the two terms have been used interchangeably by scholars.[89] Moving forward I will use the term "salmon of knowledge".[90] We must also clarify the terms used for the textual material we will come across in our corpus. A text will refer to any work of written material. Tale and story will be used interchangeably to refer to fictional written texts as well as oral narratives. When referring to non-fictional works of writing I will simply use the word text. A book will generally mean book as a codicological unit, as such it can also refer to a manuscript. A manuscript will be understood here as a handwritten book. Lastly, the term literature will be used in its most general sense as a body of all written works within a specific culture.[91] This approach is slightly different from more modern notions of what literature is, but since it will not provide us with any complications it will be used in its most general sense.[92] Medieval Irish literature, will thus include all written works of medieval Ireland, fictional and non-fictional.

[88] Ben-Amos and Goldstein, 2013 p.1-4.
[89] The quote from Green on page 4 is an example of this. Green 1993, p.191.
[90] A more detailed reasoning for this decision will be given in chapter 3.
[91] Robson also mentions the possibility of this definition of literature, but only as a hypothetical one. He cites complications with the inclusions of written bus tickets, for example. Since the body of medieval Irish literature is limited, any and all of those more practical style writings I would also include in this literature. Robson 1984, p.1.
[92] Robson 1984, p.4.

2. Salmon and Knowledge in the Old Irish Stories.

Salmon appear in a myriad of Irish stories. However, in this corpus I have only included stories that connect with themes of a salmon of knowledge, and that are brought up by scholars in their discussion on the salmon of knowledge. Yet, even though salmon are abundant in Irish literature, the salmon of knowledge is not. In this chapter we will see that some of the stories often discussed as part of the mythos of the salmon of knowledge are conspicuously lacking in salmon. It is therefore possible that in some of the tales below the salmon of knowledge, or even salmon in general, may not appear. In this chapter we will look at all the stories of our corpus in depth to discover how, and if, the salmon of knowledge features in them and how they connect to the larger narrative of the salmon of knowledge. We shall do this by focusing on the individual plots of the stories within our three categories of tales. This chapter will end with a conclusion that brings all these tales together. We will begin with the category of the "old salmon", after which we will look at the "well" stories, and lastly the "Miscellaneous" stories.

The old salmon.

The category of the old salmon is named for the motif that binds these stories together: "The oldest animal". This motif can also be found in Cross' index of Irish folklore.[93] Usually the set-up of the tale is that an answer is sought from increasingly old animals, culminating in the oldest animal which can provide the answer. A medieval example of this motif is found in the Welsh tale of *Cullwch ac Olwen* where Arthur and his men must also seek the oldest animal, a salmon, in order to find the answer to a question.[94] Eleanor Hull believes that the formula of the oldest animal is quite common in stories and she reiterates that the salmon is usually one of the oldest animals in Ireland.[95] This old salmon is usually connected to two sages from Irish stories who are known for their extraordinary lifespans, Fintan Mac Bochra and Tuan Mac Cairill. As we will see below, Fintan and Tuan share very similar stories as they have both lived in Ireland in the shape of several animals. References to these figures appear in

[93] For the motif see Cross 1952, p.59.
[94] Green 1993, p.190-191.
[95] E. Hull 1932, p.379.

several different texts. Both characters appear in the *Lebor Gabála*.[96] Fintan's story also appears in *The Hawk of Achill* discussed below. But the oldest attested story is that of Tuan in *Scél Tuan*. It is this story which we will be discussing first.

Scél Tuáin is first found in the *Lebor na hUidre* and appears in five manuscripts thereafter.[97] The edition by Meyer that is used here is based on the *Lebor na hUidre*.[98] Meyer dates the text of *Scél Tuan* to the late ninth or early tenth century based on the textual references.[99] John Carey seems to mostly agree with that dating, although he also points to a possible earlier reference to a Tuan Mac Cairill in an eight century text.[100] The story is missing a conclusion, though this does not impact the elements that are relevant for our purposes.[101]

In this story Tuan tells the cleric Finnen the story of how he came with Parthelon to Ireland and was the only survivor of these settlers after a plague had wiped everybody out. He then remained in Ireland for many years as he passed into the shapes of several different animals, a stag, a boar, a hawk and finally into the shape of a salmon. He achieves these transformations thanks to the help of God and a three day fast. As a salmon he is finally caught, eaten by a queen, and born again as a man in a new age. In this age he encounters Saint Patrick and converts to Christianity. He is referred to as a seer in this text, but only in passing.[102]

The story in the *Lebor Gabála* is much the same. Although, Carey points out that the *Lebor Gabála* may not always have included a version the *Tuan* story.[103] When a version of the story does appear in the *Lebor Gabála* the conversation with Finnen is referenced, but Tuan's backstory is much more concise. He is once again the sole survivor of the people of Parthelon.[104] The verse in the *Lebor Gabála* also reiterates that Tuan, following many other shapes, was caught as a salmon and eaten by a

[96] Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.195 and p.273.
[97] Carey "Scél Tuáin meic Chairill" 1984, p.93.
[98] Carey "Scél Tuáin" 1984, p.93.
[99] Meyer "Appendix A. Tuan mac Cairill's story to Finnen of Moville" 1897, p.81.
[100] "Scél Tuáin"1984, p.97.
[101] Meyer "Tuan mac Cairill's story" 1897, p.301.
[102] "Tuan mac Cairill's story" 1897, p.300. Carey translates this as prophet, "Scél Tuáin", p.106.
[103] "Scél Tuáin", p.98.
[104] Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.273.

queen to be reborn again.[105] In a poem in the *Lebor Gabála*, both Tuan and a history sage are mentioned. This likely does not refer to Tuan himself, but to the figure of Fintan Mac Brocha.[106]

The figure of Fintan seems to be similar to Tuan in many regards, they even appear to be conflated as the same person in some versions of the *Lebor Gabála*.[107] Fintan first appears in *Airne Fíngein*, where the main character Fíngen is told about the old sage Fintan.[108] In this story, from possibly the ninth or tenth century, Fintan is not said to survive the flood due to animal transformations instead he is asleep somewhere without the ability to speak.[109] In our corpus he is first mentioned in the *Lebor Gabála*.[110] Fintan shares some wisdom in the form of poems in several places of the text.[111] As a character in the context of the *Lebor Gabála* Fintan mac Brocha appears before Tuan as part of the people of Cessair. This particular Fintan alternatively dies in the text, (which is immediately followed by a poem by a, presumably, different Fintan) or is the shape-changing Fintan who did escape the flood.[112] A poem attributed to Fintan in the *Lebor Gabála* mentions how he survived the flood (as the only survivor of his people) underneath the waves, he also calls himself a noble great sage.[113] Fintan's time in the shape of a salmon, like that of Tuan, is only very briefly touched upon. If we are to experience it in more detail we will have to look at the *Hawk of Achill*.[114]

This story is attested in three manuscripts total, the first being in the Book of Fermoy which also contains a version of *Tuan*.[115] The tale has not been dated in any detail previously. As such the earliest date we have for this story coincides with that of the Book of Fermoy. The Book of Fermoy is a miscellany, the part of the manuscript that the *Hawk of Achill* and *Tuan* belong to has been dated to the

[105] Macalister vol 3 (1940), p.83.
[106] Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.273.
[107] Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.23.
[108] Cross and Brown 1918, p.36.
[109]Bondarenko 2012, p.130-131.
[110] As can be seen from Table 1, the *Lebor Gabála* as a text appears in older manuscripts than *The hawk of Achill* which includes Fintan.
[111] an example is Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.215.
[112] Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.189 and p.195.
[113] Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.215
[114] E. Hull 1932, p.390.
[115] Meyer "The colloquy between Fintan and the hawk of Achill" 1907, p.23.

fifteenth century.[116] It has also only been partly translated by Eleanor Hull, as such I will also rely on a translation by Roan Mackinnon Runge which is published online.[117]

In this tale Fintan converses with the hawk of Achill, they complain about being very old and tell each other all the things they have done in their long lifetimes. In his lifetime Fintan has been a man before the flood, he then turned into a salmon, an eagle, and a hawk.[118] He was eventually, by the grace of God according to Fintan, turned back into a man.[119] While the other shapes of Fintan are mentioned, it is his time in the shape of a salmon that is most remarked upon. This is partially, I believe, because his salmon shape is his connection to the hawk of Achill. The hawk had hunted Fintan as a salmon and is the reason Fintan has lost an eye and is known as the Blind one of Asseroe.[120]

The stories of Fintan and Tuan have a couple of elements in common. Firstly, both men are sole survivors of the destruction of their people and are witness to the history of Ireland as animals. As such both men become wise through age and gain knowledge through experience. They both describe experiences of being hunted as animals and both pass through the form of a salmon and a hawk. Fintan and Tuan also both appear in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* tale of *Temair I*, there they are referenced alongside other great sages.[121] Of all these sages it is Fintan who is the narrator of this poem.[122] It is clear, then, from the previous passages that these two figures were closely connected.

Both stories look like a version of the tale of the "oldest animal". Hull believes *Scél Tuan* to be at least the oldest surviving Irish version of this tale.[123] The evidence from the Welsh *Cullwch ac Olwen* may also point towards the significance of the salmon in this motif. This story follows the pattern of posing questions to increasingly old animals, culminating in a salmon.[124] Moreover, the later Irish *Adventures of Leithin* also follows the pattern, culminating in the salmon of Asseroe, which would

[116] Todd 1870, p.4. Van Hamel Codecs, Book of Fermoy 'proper'. https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Dublin,_Royal_Irish_Academy,_MS_23_E_29/pp._17-216
[117] Runge 2020, https://www.ambf.co.uk/fintan
[118] E. Hull 1932, p.390.
[119] E. Hull 1932, p.395.
[120] E. Hull 1932, p.394.
[121] Gwynn 1913, p.3.
[122] Gwynn 1913, p.5.
[123] E. Hull 1932, p.387. We will discuss this further in chapter 6.
[124] Davies 2007, p.287.

support the notion that the motif of "the oldest animal" was used in Ireland.[125] However, the tales of Tuan and Fintan do not necessarily follow that pattern. While these men do answer questions, it does not take a journey to get an answer from them. It must also be noted that Fintan's last animal shape is not a salmon but a hawk. Moreover, in the stories of Fintan and Tuan these men do not relate their wisdom as animals, they do so as men. Furthermore, given the fact that Fintan and the hawk of Achill are equally old and seemingly can tell each other an equal amount of Ireland's history, can we really say that the salmon is more significant in these tales than the other animals? Especially considering the fact that in some versions of the story of Fintan, he is not even said to have been a salmon.[126] Moreover, there are other Irish poets and sages that have connections to salmon transformations, such as Amairgin in the *lebor Gabála*, that are not used as examples of the oldest animals.[127] Even when they are used as an example of the salmon of knowledge they are not seen as a representation of the oldest animal.

The figure of Mongán, for example, is not often put next to the sages Fintan and Tuan, but he is also known in certain stories to be associated with wisdom and even a transformation into a salmon.[128] Instead, as Ó hÓgáin points out, Mongán is sometimes associated with Finn.[129] Though, Ó hÓgáin believes this to be an incorrect interpretation.[130] Mongán is said to have gone to the otherworld and gain magic knowledge there, and he has been noted to be able to travel in different animal forms including a salmon.[131] Importantly, Mongán's wisdom does not originate from his long life nor does it depend on his association with salmon. Williams believes Mongán's wisdom might come from his legendary father Mannan mac Lir, who is also associated with wisdom and water.[132] In the *Voyage of Bran*, Mannan proclaims that his son Mongán shall exist in various forms, including a salmon.[133] The passage where this is claimed is very interesting considering the question as to what constitutes wisdom:

[125] Hyde 1914-1916, p.128. Some of the events of *The Adventures of Leithin* are also referenced in *The Hawk of Achill*.
[126] Cross and Brown 1918, p.36.
[127] Berresford Ellis 1987, 29-30.
[128] Williams 2016, 65.
[129] Scott also addresses this theory. Scott 1930, p.129.
[130] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.302.
[131] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.302. "Tuan mac Cairill's story", p.24-26.
[132] Williams 2016, p.66.
[133] Scott 1930, p.129.

"He will delight the company of every fairy-knoll,
He will be the darling of every goodly land,
He will make known secrets-a course of wisdom-
In the world, without being feared.

'He will be in the shape of every beast,
Both on the azure sea and on land,
He will be a dragon before hosts at the onset,
He will be a wolf of every great forest.

'He will be a stag with horns of silver
In the land where chariots are driven,
He will be a speckled salmon in a full pool,
He will be a seal, he will be a fair-white swan."[134]

Firstly, this passage explains why Mongán is not usually put next to Fintan and Tuan who have limited shapes. From this passage it becomes clear that Mongán is a shapeshifter with many shapes. I would also like to note that the salmon only constitutes one of these shapes and is not directly connected to his "course of wisdom" mentioned in the text. The text specifically mentions making secrets known or revealing truths as this wisdom. This piece of text, therefore, does perhaps not put Mongán in the ranks of learned sages, but might indeed allude instead to a type of truth-telling seer such as Finn.

From this presentation of sources we can see that while the motif of "the oldest salmon" is often related to these stories it is not necessarily applicable. These sages pass through many different shapes of which the salmon is only one. There is no apparent reason to assume that the salmon in these transformations is somehow more related to wisdom than the others, unless one assumes that the salmon of knowledge is an existing concept. Moreover, the stories in our corpus do not necessarily follow the story structure of the oldest animal.

[134] Meyer and Nutt 1897, p.24-26.

The salmon and the well.

In this category we find the majority of our stories. These stories all relate to a well of knowledge that is connected to salmon. Another element that we will find repeatedly in connection to that well are the nuts of *imbas*. In this chapter we will first look at the stories that scholars have most often associated with the salmon of knowledge and the well, which are the stories of the Dindshenchas followed by *Tir Tairngiri*. We will then look at the stories from the Fenian cycle where supposedly certain salmon from an otherworldly well appear. In the introduction we have already seen that these "well" stories are often connected and presented as the origin of the salmon of knowledge. As we shall discover however, that origin story is not as apparent as one would want it to be. The salmon is even missing in some of these origin stories. This is also the case in the Dindshenchas of Boand, a story about Boyne where the salmon of knowledge is supposed to originate.[135]

The *Dindshenchas* consists of placename lore.[136] This placename lore appears in several different manuscripts with varying entries.[137] The oldest appearance is in the Book of Leinster.[138] These stories appear in both verse form and in prose form. The so-called Metrical Dindshenchas has been edited and translated by Edward Gwynn, he based his edition primarily on the Book of Leinster.[139] Whitley Stokes has published editions and translations of the prose Dindshenchas contained in the Rennes, Bibliothèque de Rennes Métropole, MS 598 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 506 both of which date from the fourteenth or fifteenth century.[140] The tales of Boand and Sinann appear in all these editions. Even though the stories in the varying manuscripts are similar they do vary in the details, some of these details are important for our purposes.

The *Metrical Dindshenchas* includes two stories about the origin of the Boyne, *Boand I* and *Boand II*. According to these stories the Boyne received its name from a woman named Boand who was drowned. An interesting detail from *Boand I* is that we learn that there is a river with many names which

[135] For example, Ó hÓgáin 1988, p.57.
[136] Gwynn 1913, p.v.
[137] Rath Cnámrossa, for example, appears in the Rennes Dindshenchas but not in the Bodleian. Stokes "Rennes" 1894, p.334.
[138] See table 1 in the appendix.
[139] Gwynn 1913, p.v-vi.
[140] "Rennes" 1894 p.272. Stokes "Bodleian dinnshenchas" 1892 p.467.

flows to paradise, that river is known as Segais in the otherworld. That same river is also known, according to the text, as the river of the white hazel in Cooley, and even as the Jordan in Israel.[141] These rivers come together in Nechtan's, Boand's husband's, well. Out of pride Boand went to test the magical properties of the well. The well then attacked and mutilated her, as was the power of the well. She fled towards the sea so that no one could see her injuries. The water of the well followed her to the sea and that is how the river came to be. According to Gwynn this well gushed forth "every kind of mysterious evil".[142] However, *mí-rún* could also be translated as evil knowledge, as knowledge is a definition that is later used for the word *rún*.[143] The story keeps going and we are told about Boand's affair with the Dagda.[144] This affair is the focus of *Boand II*. Boand goes to Nechtan's well in an attempt to give birth to Óengus (her child by the Dagda) in secret. Unfortunately for Boand the well then rose up against her and drowned her.[145] In *Boand I* it is Boand's pride that causes her demise, while in *Boand II* it is her desire to hide a shameful affair that causes her death.

The Story of Boand is also found in both the *Rennes* and *Bodleian Dindshenchas*. These variations of the story are most like *Boand I* in the metrical Dindshenchas. In the *Bodleian Dindshenchas* Boann, instead of Boand, is the wife of Nechtan. Despite warnings it would "disgrace" people who came to it alone Boann went to the well on her own and said that it held no power unless it could disgrace her shape, which it then promptly did. Boann then fled out of the fairy mound, the well followed her to the sea and she drowned in the river mouth.[146] In these two versions pride seems to be Boand's greatest sin. It is also important to note that in none of these versions do we find any reference to salmon, nor is there much talk of wisdom. Instead, the majority of these stories focus on Boand's demise for failing to head warnings. For a reference to salmon we must turn to the Dindshenchas of Sinann.

The *Metrical Dindshenchas* also contains two versions of the story of Sinann. *Sinann I* opens with a description of Sinann as radiant and ever-generous.[147] Sinann sets out to look at the magic spring

[141] Gwynn 1913, p.27.
[142] Gwynn 1913, p.29.
[143] eDIL s.v. 1 rún.
[144] Gwynn 1913, p.31-33.
[145] Gwynn 1913, p.37-39.
[146] Stokes "Bodleian" 1892, p.500.
[147] Gwynn 1913, p.288.

within Condla's domain. Seven rivers spring forth from this well underneath the sea. A hazel tree stands beside the well and it holds the magic lore of Segais (*immas na Segas*).[148] That tree produces fruits (presumably hazelnuts) called here the "nuts of Crinmond" that fall into the water when ripe.[149] These nuts contain special lore that Sinann tries to obtain by following the stream of the Segais because, the text claims, it was the one thing she did not have. The waters of the well then rise up and drown her, afterwards a new river is born bearing her name.[150] *Sinann II* similarly relates to us that Condla's well was beneath the ocean and several rivers sprang from it. The number of hazel trees beside the well has increased to nine. [151] These trees are now called the "hazels of Crimall the sage" and apparently exist with the help of magic and druids (*dráidechta*).[152] When these nuts are ripe they once more fall into the well. This is where salmon come in. *Sinann II* is the only time that salmon are mentioned in the metrical and prose Dindshenchas versions of Boand and Sinann.[153]

The next sequence of events is not entirely clear, Gwyn gives the following translation:

"When the cluster of nuts is ripe
they fall down into the well:
they scatter below on the bottom,
and the salmon eat them.

From the juice of the nuts (no paltry matter)
are formed the mystic bubbles;
thence come momently the bubbles
down the green-flowing stream"[154]

[148] Gwynn 1913, p.286.
[149] Gwynn 1913, p.289.
[150] Gwynn 1913, p.291.
[151] Gwynn 1913, p.293.
[152] Gwynn 1913, p.292.
[153] We will come back to the variant readings given by Stokes in chapter 5.
[154] Gwynn 1913, p.294-295.

It is possible that the juice from the fruit is also consumed by the salmon. By consuming this juice, the salmon would then contain this knowledge. However, to me, it seems more likely that in this sequence of events the salmon merely aid in the process of releasing the juices of the nuts which create the "mystic bubbles" or bubbles of knowledge (*bolca immaiss*).[155] In *Sinann II* the well does not attack her, rather Sinann goes into the water to obtain the bubbles but drowns while doing so. After that, a new river is born bearing her name.[156] *Sinann II* then gives additional details of other versions of the tale. In one, the pool is named as *Lind Mna Feile*. In another version an entirely different person was drowned in the stream, Cu Nuadat.[157]

In the *Rennes Dindshenchas* a lot of similar elements are repeated, Sinann once again comes from the Land of the Promise, specifically *Tír Tairngiri*, and seeks out Connla's well underneath the ocean. There is a hazel tree which produces nuts of special knowledge that fall into the water. In this version Sinann went to seek the well because she only wanted wisdom. She came to "The Pool of the Modest Woman" (*Linn Mna Feile*) but she was once again overwhelmed by the water and drowned.[158] In the *Bodleian Dindshenchas* much of the phrasing of the story is the same but there are some differences. One important variation in the *Bodleian Dindshenchas* is that the well Sinann seeks out is said to be known by everyone as the "Well of Knowledge".[159] It must also be noted here that, while Stokes provides an alternative reading that includes the salmon of knowledge in his editions of the texts, it does not, in fact, appear as part of these stories in the manuscripts.[160]

It would seem that the tales of Boann and Sinann are only tentatively connected. The origin of the two rivers in these stories is similar but the wells are described differently. For example, they have different owners. There are some slight similarities. In the *Boand I*, the river is also named the river of the white hazel, which would give it a connection to the hazels growing around Connla's well. The river is also called Segais, which is a word also used in the Dindshenchas of Sinann. If we take *mí-rún* as "evil knowledge" that description might overlap with the themes in the tale of Sinann. However, in the

[155] Gwynn 1913, p.294.
[156] Gwynn 1913, p.295
[157] Gwynn 1913, p.295-297
[158] "Rennes" 1894, p.457.
[159] "Bodleian" 1892, p.498.
[160] "Rennes" p.457.

Dindshenchas of Sinann the well as a whole seems to not be painted as something evil. It could be argued that the rivers desire to drown Boand in *Boand II*, when she attempts to hide her infidelity, could have something to do with revealing truth or knowledge. However, this is not apparent from the text on its own. In general, Sinann and the well of her story seem to be regarded as much more positive then Boand and the well of her tale. The story of Sinann could easily be taken as more of a cautionary tale (do not go to seek this splendour of druid magic for it will harm you, it has harmed this noble woman before). In contrast, Boand's story seems to have more of a theme of a wrongdoer getting what is coming for them (Boand went against the established rules and was punished for it). The elements of a hazel tree and an otherworldly well, are then the only elements which connect these tales, not salmon.

These elements are also repeated in *Tir Tairngiri*. The earliest we find this tale attested is in the Book of Ballymote and the Yellow Book of Lecan, which are both dated around the end of the fourteenth century.[161] Vernam Hull dates the actual writing contained in these manuscripts to 1150-1200.[162] In this tale there is a passage where Cormac is exploring an otherworldly fortress, there he finds a fountain with five streams flowing from it and the people of the fortress drinking the water. Nine hazels of Buan grow over this well, and they drop their purple nuts into the water of the well. Here the five salmon who swim in the well separate the nuts from the husks and send these husks floating down the stream. "the sound of the falling of those streams is more melodious than any music that (men) sing".[163] In this passage a connection is made with music, and later in the tale the well is explained as a well of knowledge where each stream represents one of the senses. Men of arts are those who have drank from all these streams and from the well of knowledge.[164] This story also gives us a clear image of the role of the salmon in this ecosystem. The salmon do not eat the fruit to gain the qualities of the nuts, rather by eating the nuts the salmon release a certain quality from them to wider waters.[165]

Moving to the stories from the Fenian cycle then, the story of the *Macgnímartha* Find is connected with the stories above because it features a salmon from a well or pool that brings knowledge.

[161] V. Hull 1949, p.871.
[162] V. Hull 1949, p.871.
[163] Stokes "The Irish ordeals, Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise, and the decision as to Cormac's sword" 1891, p.214.
[164] Stokes "Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise" 1891, p.216.
[165] "Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise" 1891, p.214.

The *Macgnímartha* is only found in the Laud 610 manuscript, also known as *Leabhar na Rátha*. The manuscript has been copied somewhere in the fifteenth century but the language of the text itself has been dated by Meyer to the 12th century.[166] In the *Macgnímartha* Finn is aiming to learn poetry. He comes to the Boyne where a certain Finnéces is searching for the Salmon of Fec's Pool. Finnéces is in search of this salmon because it had been prophesized that nothing would remain unknown to him once he had consumed the Salmon of Fec. When Finn is with the poet the salmon is found and Finn is given the task of cooking the salmon, but he must not eat it. While cooking the salmon he burns his thumb and puts it in his mouth to cool. As wisdom comes to Finn, Finnéces believes it was Finn who was actually supposed to eat the salmon. The old poet lets Finn eat the rest of the salmon. After this incident Finn becomes a full poet, and all he had to do to get knowledge of a situation was to put his thumb in his mouth and sing through a *Teinm Láida*.[167] This is the clearest incident of a salmon of knowledge in our corpus. Yet, the salmon here is never actually referred to as the salmon of knowledge, only as the salmon of *Linn Feic*. Moreover, an origin of this salmon is never given.

Despite all of this, the salmon of the *Macgnímartha* is often connected to the Dindshenchas of Boand and Sinann.[168] Yet, there do not actually appear to be that many similarities between these stories. In fact, the story of Finn seems to be the connecting factor between the stories of Sinann and Boand. Certain elements from these tales are linked in such a manner by scholars that they make these tales appear as a cohesive whole with the salmon at the centre of the connections. Yet, as we have seen above, it is not the existence of a salmon that connects these tales, it is the existence of a well.

A salmon swims in a pool in Sinan's story and has a connection to the nuts of wisdom. The salmon in the *Macgnímartha* has a connection to wisdom and knowledge, is from a pool or well, and swims around in the Boyne. The story of Boand, the origin of the Boyne, involves a magic otherworldly well. A well/pool is the only connection that appears in all three of these tales. The hazelnut eating salmon of Sinann is not apparent in any of the other tales. This salmon is only associated with the story of Boand because a salmon of knowledge appears on the Boyne in the *Macgnímartha*. While both rivers

[166] Meyer "Irish miscellanies: Anecdota from the Stowe MS. n° 992" 1881-1883, p.195.
[167] Meyer "The Boyish Exploits of Finn" 1904, p.185-186.
[168] For example, Ó hÓgáin 1988, p.57 and Green 1993, p.190-191.

seem to have some association with hazelnuts, this does not necessarily relate to salmon. Moreover, neither of the tales seem to have a clear link to the events of the *Macgnímartha*, except perhaps the existence of Crimall.

The old Fenian Crimall appears in the *Macgnímartha* and the name Crimall is given to a sage connected to the nuts of knowledge.[169] However, it is important to keep in mind that similar names do not guarantee a connection and may just be a coincidence.[170] This is especially true because the Crimall in the *Macgnímartha* is a Fenian warrior and is not referred to as a sage.[171] There is, however, another story from the Dindshenchas that possibly connects the Fenian tradition with the tradition of the nuts of knowledge.

In *Rath Cnámrossa,* from the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, there is reference to some nuts of love that were brought to Finn from the Segais.[172] However, Finn recognises that these nuts are not of "good knowledge" but of "doubt and uneasiness". This story also appears in the *Rennes Dindshenchas* but not in the *Bodleian.*[173] In the *Rennes* version a women fell in love with Finn and made nine nuts of Segais with love-charms. Finn once again recognizes them for what they are, not nuts of knowledge but nuts of ignorance.[174] It is possible that these nuts of love are a variation on the nuts of knowledge. This tale might strengthen the connection between the *Macgnímartha* and the Dindshenchas of Sinann because nuts of knowledge are referenced in relation to Finn. However, no salmon are involved in these tales. As such it is by no means sure that a salmon of knowledge forms a connection between these tales.

Another text that some have associated with the salmon of knowledge is *Senbecc*.[175] Two different versions of the tale of Cú Chulainn and Senbecc are extant, one in a seventeenth century manuscript and another found in the fifteenth century, Stowe 992/ Royal Irish Academy MS D iv 2.[176] The latter fifteenth century text is the narrative from our corpus, which we will focus on here. In this

[169] "The Boyish Exploits of Finn" 1904, p.185. Gwynn 1913, p.292.
[170] See for example the name Cáma in the Acallam. Dooley and Roe 1999, p.225.
[171] "Boyish Exploits" 1904, p.185.
[172] Gwynn 1913, p.131
[173] "Rennes", p.334.
[174] "Rennes", p.334.
[175] Nagy "Otter, salmon, and eel" 1985/86, p.129.
[176] Meyer has dated this manuscript to the end of the fourteenth century but the Van Hamel codecs gives a date of the fifteenth century. Meyer "Irish Miscellanies" 1883-1885, p.173. See also the Van Hamel codecs for the date of the second manuscript.

tale Cú Chulainn goes out fishing on the Boyne, specifically to hunt the salmon of *Lind Feic*.[177] A man in a bronze boat then comes into his path. Cú Chulainn seizes the boat and Senbecc, the man in it, tries to bargain for his release by offering Cú Chulainn some of his magic items. This negotiation does not go well for Senbecc but before any exchange of items can happen Senbecc plays on his harp (*timpán*) until Cú Chulainn falls asleep. Senbecc then returns home unscathed.

It ends with a poem that has not been previously translated but reveals to us that Senbecc is from the Segais.

Fuair hua Eibricc forsin sruth
itir sceoil ainscelu gugud
Séphain Senbecc sal iar sruth
do Coinculaind chostadhach.
Ni hagh a seinm na suainchi
Senbecc na seghsa siancha
for bruinnib Bonne braiche
do dhalta Scathchi sciathcha.
Senbecc ua hEibric a Seghais
is é ro sepaind a seinm. Finit.[178]

he met a grandson of Eibricc on the stream
between a great tale of a tale yonder (?)
Senbecc played music of ocean after stream[179]
for the powerful Cú Chulainn
his playing of the sleep music was not fortuitous
senbecc of the murmering Segais
on the banks of the everlasting Boyne

[177] "Irish Miscellanies" 1883-1885, p.183.
[178] "Irish Miscellanies" p.183. The punctuation was added by the editor.
[179] As was pointed out to me by Micheal O'Flaithearta, it is possible that this music of ocean after stream refers to a specific type of musical composition. The ocean and stream in this instance are representative of rough and gentle music. It may be a reference to the continual quality of a music piece, from source to sea. It might also be a reference to salmon as salmon migrate from the rivers to the ocean and back. Personal communication 2022.

for the little fosterling of Schátach of the shields

Senbecc grandson of Eibrecc from the Segais

it is he who played the music[180]

The Segais is one of the alternative names given to the Boyne in *Boand I*, and is often identified as the well in which the nuts of knowledge fall and in which the salmon of knowledge swims.[181] This text then gives another connection between Segais and the Boyne that we had not previously seen. It might also possibly strengthen the connection between the Segais and poetry, or at least poetic knowledge, because of Senbecc's talented harp playing. Moreover, in the later seventeenth century texts it is said that Senbecc came from the Segais in search of *imbas*. This *imbas* was contained in the fruits of hazels which drop into a well, the wisdom is then carried from that well into the Boyne.[182] Interestingly, Senbecc is said to be wearing purple clothes, a colour associated with the bubbles of *imbas* in other texts.[183] Here the connection with a well surrounded by hazelnuts is very clear but salmon do not play in active role in the story. In fact, in our last story there is also no significant salmon passage.

Another Fenian addition to our "well" stories is the *Acallam.* its place among the Fenian tradition places it within the category of "well" stories even if the actual appearance of a well is rather small. The *Acallam* appears in three fifteenth century manuscripts; Laud 610, The Book of Lismore, and MS Rawlinson B 487.[184] The date of the text is generally situated at c. 1200.[185] This, rather lengthy, narrative is a collection of stories about the Fianna facilitated by a frame-tale where Saint Patrick meets the last remaining Fenian warriors and they tell him tales about the past.[186] While Finn's "tooth of wisdom" is referred to plenty of times in this text, no direct explanation is given for how Finn got his "tooth of wisdom". At some point a reference is made to when Finn put his thumb under his wisdom tooth for the first time while sitting on a stone, but no further origin is given.[187]

[180] My translation with corrections from Micheal O'Flaithearta 2022.
[181] Berresford Ellis 1987, p.184.
[182] "Scél Tuáin", p.67.
[183] For Senbecc's purple cloak see "Irish Miscellanies*"* p.183. For the purple bubbles see "Rennes" p.457.
[184] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.xxxi.
[185] Dooley 2004, p.98.
[186] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.viii.
[187] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.151.

Salmon and wells are not absent in the *Acallam*, however. One passage involves salmon and a pool. Oisín went to retrieve some water from a spring of Usnach, but he made sure to keep the spring a secret. Eight speckled salmon were swimming in that spring and flourishing. Oisín brought back the water from that spring along with the salmon, and some watercress and brooklime.[188] This passage is used as a way to set up the proper divisions of food in Ireland.[189] There might also be a connection to the *Macgnímartha* as, at the beginning of the tale, Cailte is said to go to the pool of Fiac, which is on the Boyne.[190] This might be a connection to the pool of Fec, although it is not elaborated on any further in the text apart from being yet another location. Another element that might connect back to the well stories is the name of Finn's musician. This great musician of the Fianna is named Cnú Deróil, which carries the word Cnú or nut, who was originally of the Tuatha De Danann.[191] Lastly, Finn is called the salmon of gold in this tale.[192]

There is thus not much to connect the salmon to Finn's knowledge directly. There might, however, be some evidence to connect a salmon to the wisdom of Patrick. At some point Patrick recites a poem saying the following: "A well I have left in the land, and two salmon without care, till white doom they remain there, believe me, Caílte mine".[193] This poem seems to be referring to a holy well of Patrick, not a well of wisdom. Still, it is significant that Patrick is supposed to have placed salmon in it. Interestingly, Patrick is also given the epithet of salmon of heaven in this tale, similar to Finn's title of golden salmon.[194]

Lastly, we come to *Feis* as the final "well" story. As previously discussed, this is the youngest text within our corpus.[195] Thus, we cannot be certain that all the wording of the story is medieval. The earliest full text is not found until the 17th century.[196] This is the version that we will consider for its plot elements, though keeping in mind that it might not be representative of what a medieval version of the

[188] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.72.
[189] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.72.
[190] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.4.
[191] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.21.
[192] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.107.
[193] Dooley and Roe, 1999, p.216.
[194] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.5.
[195] P.6 above.
[196] Joynt 1936, p.iv.

tale might have looked like. Nonetheless, *Feis* remains an important link in the tradition as our youngest text.

Importantly, this is the only entry in our corpus where we find the term *eó fis* referring to salmon of knowledge.[197] Unfortunately, that is also the only reference to a salmon in this story. The salmon is not involved in the story of how Finn got his wisdom. In fact, the reference to the salmon of knowledge is to signal to the audience that the salmon was not how Finn got his true wisdom. The "true" story provided here is that there was a "fountain of the moon" of the Tuatha Danann, specifically of Beg son of Buan. All those who drank water from the well would be gifted with "wisdom and fore-knowledge".[198] One day Finn approached the well with some of his men while hunting. To stop him from approaching further the three female guardians of the well threw the well's water at Finn and his men. Some of that water got into their mouths and this is how Finn got his wisdom. This is regarded as the "true" version of how Finn got his knowledge. Another story, however, is also included here. This involves Finn and his men drinking water from an otherworldly cup.[199] A salmon does not appear in either of these stories.

What we have seen then, after having looked at these "well" stories, is that there are some repeating elements in the stories relating to water, hazelnuts, and wisdom. However, the salmon only appears in some of these stories and its status as a vessel of knowledge is at least inconsistent. Therefore, the salmon cannot be considered a connective element in any of these tales.

Miscellaneous

The following "Miscellaneous" tales are sometimes also considered in the context of the salmon of knowledge.[200] These texts are less concerned with wisdom or knowledge as concepts, but they do all concern salmon and special rivers. One of the most important ideas related to wisdom that we will find in these stories below is that of the "fire in the water".[201]

[197] Joynt 1936, p.41.
[198] O'Kearney 1855, p.75.
[199] O'Kearney 1855, p.73.
[200] Kudenko 2019 p.80.
[201] Kudenko 2019, p.104.

We will start with a passage found in both *Momera* and *Coir Anmann*: the shining salmon from paradise. *Momera* is found only in one manuscript, The Yellow Book of Lecan.[202] Ksenia Kudenko has given the date of the manuscript section of *Momera* as 1399/1398 and has proposed a possible date for the text at the mid twelfth-century.[203] Sharon Arbuthnot proposes a similar date for *Coir Anmann* in the late twelfth-century.[204] Several recensions of this text are known across different manuscript, the earliest being found in the Book of Úi Maine.[205]

The passage from *Momera* that concerns us takes place in Spain on the river *Eibhear* (Ebro). According to the text, every seventh year a salmon comes into this river from paradise.[206] What makes this salmon special is not any wisdom it brings but the wool growing from the salmon. The woed princess in the story is told by a druid to go into the river so that she might catch the salmon and take the wool from it. She then makes a cloak of that wool for her husband. The colours of the cloak are interesting if not a little obscure. Putting it simply, the colours of the fish are in the cloak and the cloak appears to be multi-coloured or at least colour changing.[207] A prophesized name is then given to, Eoghan the splendid, the wearer of the cloak. In *Coir Anmann*, the story once again revolves around Eoghan Taidlech (Eoghan the splendid) and his shining salmon cloak.[208] While in Spain, the salmon once again comes from the river of paradise. The salmon possesses wool, which is described as multi-coloured in this tale. The wool is once again taken from the salmon and Eoghan is given a shining multi-coloured mantel.[209]

The only element that these stories have in common with the well stories is that these salmon and rivers seem to have a connection to paradise, as is mentioned in some of the Dindshenchas material and in *Tir Tairngiri*. The "shining" or "illumination" aspect of knowledge is sometimes also used to describe the knowledge that Finn got, such as in the *Macgnímartha*.[210] Ford also relates this idea of shining knowledge to the story of Boand, though this is not entirely apparent from the wording of the

[202] Kudenko 2017, p.92.
[203] Kudenko 2019, p.8.
[204] Arbuthnot 2001, p.285.
[205] Arbuthnot 2001, p.286. For further reference see also Table 1 of the appendix.
[206] "Secret recess of creation" as translated by O'Curry 1855, p.161.
[207] Nuijten 2016, p.73.
[208] Stokes "Cóir Anmann (fitness of names)" 1891, p.303.
[209] Stokes "Cóir Anmann", 1891 p.303.
[210] See the definition of *teinm láeda*. "Boyish Exploits", p.186.

text.[211] Apart from that, these salmon have no connection to any themes surrounding wisdom, they are more closely related to biblical themes.

Lastly then, we will review one more story from *Coir Anmann* that expresses some biblical themes as well. A barren queen named Mugain went to seek the help of two holy men Finnén Mag Bile and bishop Aeda.[212] This name Finnén Mag Bile is the same as the cleric with whom Tuan had a conversation.[213] The two helped the queen to become pregnant, they blessed water for her and after drinking this water she became pregnant. When it was time to give birth she gave birth to a lamb. The queen was quite distressed that she should give birth to a lamb, but the clerics urged her to continue the treatment. She drank more blessed water, became pregnant again, and gave birth to a salmon. After drinking of the water a third time, and then bathing in blessed water as well, the queen gave birth to a son.[214] Every time Mugain gave birth to an animal she was unpleased and feared it would bring her shame. The clerics urged her to keep up the treatment because the process of giving birth to a lamb and a salmon was part of a process cleansing her womb. What happens to the lamb is not exactly stated, but once the queen gives birth to a "silvern salmon with fins of gold" the clerics specify that they will make reliquaries of this salmon.[215] The religious themes in this story are quite clear but the connection with wisdom is once again not really present.

Conclusion

Of all our three categories the "well" story seems to be most abundant in Irish literature. In those stories, hazelnuts appear to play a larger and more consistent role then any salmon do. The old wise men that we look at in our stories do follow the trend of appearing in the shapes of salmon in their long lifetime. Yet, this long lifetime is what seems to have granted them their wisdom, not the shape or experience of being a salmon. But, as we have also seen, these stories do not exactly follow the pattern of the "oldest animal". In the miscellaneous stories a salmon does not necessarily seem to be a carrier

[211] Ford 1974, p.69.
[212] "Cóir Anmann", 1891 p.345.
[213] "Tuan mac Cairill's story", p.285.
[214] "Cóir Anmann", p.345.
[215] "Cóir Anmann", p.345.

of knowledge on its own. Even when it is a resident of paradise, a salmon provides the humans with bright wool, not with any wisdom. Reading only a selection of these tales might make it appear as if they are unified, but the connections actually present are quite tentative. We have seen this in the association between the Dindshenchas of Sinann, Boand, and the *Macgnímartha*. Moreover, within this corpus, based on texts that are used by scholars to discuss the salmon of knowledge, we see that the salmon of knowledge plays a marginal role at best. Furthermore, the connections that can be made between these tales rarely rely on the existence of salmon.

For example, the term Segais is often used as the name of a stream in these stories. It is mentioned in the Dindshenchas of Boand where it is one of the names for the Boyne. According to the story it is known as Segais in the Síd, the otherworld. One of the other names mentioned for the river is the river of the white hazel, this is the only element in the Dindshenchas of Boand that connects it to the tradition of the hazelnuts at the well. The Segais does appear across several stories, such as the story of *Senbecc*. The tale of *Senbecc* also connects this Segais to the *Macgnímartha* when Cú Chulainn is said to be fishing for the salmon of Linn Feic on the Boyne.

Even in the Fenian tradition the salmon of knowledge is not a prevalent element in all stories. It does not appear at all in the *Acallam*, for example. It does appear in *Feis*, but it is explicitly disputed as an origin of Finn's wisdom. Two other options are given instead, both related to water. This is rather important considering that the Fenian tradition of the salmon of knowledge is supposed to be the strongest and most direct evidence for a knowledge-providing salmon.[216] However, that only appears in the *Macgnímartha*.

After reviewing all these stories and their connections it becomes apparent that there was no central story about the salmon of knowledge. In fact, in none of these stories is a salmon of knowledge explained as such. This can be because there was no established concept of the salmon of knowledge. Alternatively, there was a central story of a salmon of knowledge so well established that it needed no explanation. We might be able to ascertain which one of these options is more likely if we look at the words used to describe salmon in these texts, which is what we will do below.

[216] McBride 2014, p.19.

3. A Discussion on the Words Used

Having now looked at these different stories it is clear that the concept of a knowledge providing salmon is not as apparent as one might hope. Even the name of this concept is not as apparent as one might hope. Scholars have used the terms salmon of knowledge and salmon of wisdom almost interchangeably. Yet, to our modern sensibilities wisdom and knowledge are not readily interchangeable. While I have been using the term salmon of knowledge in this thesis, at the start of my research I was more familiar with the term salmon of wisdom. It is the difference between these two terms that is important to the following discussion.

A discussion on the words that are used in these stories to address knowledge and salmon will help contextualize the paradigm of knowledge that the salmon is associated with. The use of the Irish words might reveal associations or repeating formulas regarding the salmon of knowledge. If terms would be consistent across texts, for example, it might point to the existence of a consistent and prominent motif. Yet, this does not appear to be the case. As we can see in Table 2 in the Appendix, the terms for knowledge and wisdom are not only used inconsistently in Irish texts they are also translated inconsistently.[217]

In this chapter we will explore the Irish words in these texts which are used in the context of the salmon of knowledge. We will attempt to ascertain what the significance is of the words used and what they can tell us about the concept of the salmon of knowledge. We will also explore how scholarly translations have impacted our interpretation of the salmon of knowledge. In this discussion we will rely on the translations found in eDIL. However, it is important to remember that the eDIL itself relies on previous translation by scholars to supply its dictionary. As such, some caution needs to be taken to avoid circular reasoning.

Fis

The Irish word *fis* encapsulates our current conundrum perfectly, namely, are we discussing a salmon of knowledge or a salmon of wisdom? One of the Irish phrases modern scholars use to signify

[217] P.108-114 below. *Fis* is one example of this.

this concept is *eó fis.*[218] A literal translation of *eó fis* seems to be salmon of knowledge. The word *eó* is translated as salmon.[219] The exact definition of *fis* is given in the eDIL as follows: "the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information, that which is known".[220] It is often used as knowledge in the context of information.

In Table 2 in the Appendix we also see that sometimes one translator gives several different English translations for the same Irish word.[221] Within the *Lebor Gabála*, for example, *fis* is translated by Macalister as "wisdom", "knowledge", and "science". Looking at *fis* in contexts unrelated to a salmon, "information" seems to always be a likely translation of the term.[222] Finn's ability of prophecy also connects to this definition because Finn does not necessarily see visions of the future, instead he receives information about the present and the future as truths are revealed to him.[223] "Knowledge' might be a fitting overlapping translation for all these slight variations in meaning. A translation of *eó fis* as "salmon of knowledge" would then seem reasonable.

Yet, the context in which the salmon appears in our corpus is often related to music and inspiration, not necessarily simply information. Inspiration might be more often associated with wisdom than it is with learned knowledge and information. Contextually, then, *fis* may not represent the right meaning to cover the concept of the salmon of knowledge. As it is not simply knowledge of information that is connected with the salmon. The issue is complicated further by the fact that we do not often see the term *fis* used directly next to, or as an attribute of, a salmon. In my corpus there is only one direct reference to a type of "salmon of knowledge".

In *Feis* the term *bradáin fios* is used to express to idea of a salmon of (fore)knowledge in the edition by O'Kearney in the prose text.[224] There is, however, a poem left untranslated by O'Kearney present in the edition by Maud Joynt which does use the term *eó fis*.

[218] MacLeod 2006, p.35, for example, uses this term in her article where she translates it as "salmon of wisdom".
[219] eDIL s.v. 1 eó , eú.
[220] eDIL s.v. 1 fis, fius.
[221] P.108-114 below
[222] See Appendix Table 2, p.108-114.
[223] Examples of this are found in the *Acallam* where Finn asks the question of where his dog has gone. Dooley and Roe 1999, p.9.
[224] O'Kearney 1855, p.175.

"Trí hingine Beic mic Buain,

is acu ibhid na sluaigh;

is uatha sin atá thall

fios dearbhtha Tuath Dé Danann.

Tobur atá thall 'sa lios

is ann dogeibhthur gach fios;

is dearbh do gach aon ros blais

gurab í sin an tseaghais.

Gé do fuarus in t-eó fis,

neimhthní co ránac an tseaghais;

as é in fios forburtach damh

ó ránac an triur inghean"[225]

three daughters of Bec mac Buan[226]

it is by them that the host drinks

it is from them that are there

the certain knowledge of the Tuatha Dé Dannan.[227]

a well that is yonder in the fort[228]

it is there that all knowledge is found

it is certain to everybody who tasted it

that that one is the Segais.[229]

even if I received the salmon of knowledge

it was nothing until I reached the Segais[230]

[225] Joynt 1936, p.41.
[226] My translation.
[227] This punctuation is my own.
[228] As Micheal O'Flaithearta pointed out, this fort is most likely a reference to a fairy fort or *sídh*. Personal communication 2022.
[229] Micheal O'Flaithearta also pointed out the fact that Segais in this instance could have a double meaning. Referring to the poetic art and potent knowledge and also referencing the stream of Segais. This double meaning also involves the "it" from the previous line. "It" is probably purposefully ambiguous as to what it refers to. It could refer to the water from the well, it could be from the Segais or poetic art. I believe it is likely to referring to the well from out of which the waters of knowledge come; therefore, I have taken it here as the Segais.
[230] In accordance with the double meaning, we could also translate "until I obtained the *Segais*, i.e. the poetic art".

I have the full knowledge

since I reached the three daughters.[231]

Aside from *eó fis,* the Segais, which we have already come across in the Dindshenchas, also appears in this poem.[232] However, Maud Joynt's edition is based on a text of *Feis* from the 17th century, the wording of the poem appears only in the 17th century version of the tale.[233] As such, we cannot grant much authority to this passage regarding the medieval use of the term. The story may be attested in our time period, but the exact words are not. Therefore, the only reference to a salmon of knowledge as *eó fis* in our corpus is questionable.

However, there is one Medieval Irish text where the term *eó fis* seems to appear. This is in the Middle Irish poem known as *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit*. The poem is preserved in the MS Egerton 90, this is a composite manuscript made up of fragments from as late as the 16th century. The folios that preserve the poem are presumably fragments from the Book of Uí Maine and are therefore from the 14th century.[234]The line in the manuscript reads "muna et*h*aind inteo fis"[235] which Meyer renders as: "Muna ethaind in t-eó fis*".*[236] This roughly translates to: "unless I had eaten the salmon of knowledge".[237] The poem concerns a battle, and the salmon of knowledge is only referenced in passing. This makes it all the more significant, as it implies that the audience did not need context to understand the reference. This poem on its own might then give the impression that the salmon of knowledge was a well-established concept. Moreover, *eó fis* as a term for the salmon of knowledge is used in later post-medieval texts such as in *Cath Muighe Léana*.[238] Still, it is only very scarcely attested, and any other uses of the term *eó fis* are absent in the medieval tradition.

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[231] Thank you to Micheal O'Flaithearta for correcting my translation.
[232] p.25 above.
[233] Joynt 1936, p.iii-iv.
[234] Van Hamel Codecs *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit*. https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Beannacht,_a_Bruin,_ar_Brigit Arbuthnot 2001, p.285.
[235] My transcription of British Library MS Egerton 90.
[236] Meyer "Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften: Incipit do dūanaib sochair clainne Ceallaig dorinni Mac Līag et alii poete do Thadg catha Brīain" 1912, p.227.
[237] My translation.
[238] O'Curry 1855, p.96.

As can be seen from Table 2 in the Appendix, the term *fis* on its own is used regularly in medieval texts.[239] In the *Acallam*, *fis* also seems to be used as part of the term *dét fis*, translated as "wisdom tooth" by Dooley and Roe.[240] In the *Acallam* Finn's "wisdom tooth" grants him the ability to see truths, be a soothsayer, and sometimes prophet. Moreover, according to eDIL, the term *fis* can be translated to "a vision".[241] This type of prophetic information could be considered more non-learned knowledge and thus wisdom, but still connected to the translation of *fis* as "information".[242] When Finn eats the salmon of knowledge in the *Macgnímartha* the text also uses the term *fis* to name the knowledge that Finn got from the salmon. Yet, this type of *fis* is not just linked with information it is also linked with poetic knowledge.

Imbas

Imbas is the type of knowledge that is supposedly contained in the hazelnuts that the salmon of knowledge eat.[243] As we can see from Table 2 in the Appendix certain words such as *éicse* and *imbas* are sometimes translated as knowledge and wisdom respectively, but both words also have connotations with prophecy and divination.[244] These elements of prophecy and divination do seem to return as generally accepted aspects of the salmon of knowledge.

Nagy has also talked about the concept of *imbas*, he believes that *imbas* is a type of knowledge often sought out by poets and acquired in situations where liminality plays a role.[245] Liminality represents a sort of threshold sate of being in-between. Nagy also stresses the liminality of the poetic profession.[246] He believes that poetic knowledge and divination are related to each other in the *imbas forosnai.*[247] *Imbas forosnai*, according to Cormac's Glossary, is to be understood as knowledge that enlightens.[248] This *imbas forosnai* is not only found in Cormac's Glossary but it is also present in the

[239] P.108-114 below.
[240] For the edition see Stokes "Acallamh na senórach" 1900, p.7. For the translation see Dooley and Roe 1999, p.9.
[241] eDIL s.v. fís.
[242] eDIL s.v. 1 fis, fius.
[243] Nagy "Liminality and Knowledge" 1981, p.139.
[244] Appendix Table 2, p.108-114.
[245] "Liminality and Knowledge" 1981, p.135.
[246] "Liminality and Knowledge", p.143.
[247] "Liminality and Knowledge", p.136.
[248] O'Donovan 1868, p.94.

Macgnímartha together with two other things a poet should be master of: *teinm laéda* and *dichetul dichennaib*.[249] In Meyer's translation, all three of these elements seem to have something to do with divination. *Teinm laéda* is translated as "illumination of song", *imbas forosnai* as "knowledge which illuminates", and *dichetul dichennaib* as "extempore incantation".[250] However, the exact meaning of these terms is not entirely agreed upon by scholars. Ó hÓgáin, for example, believes that *teinm laéda* could be translated as "chant of fire" and that this reflects the idea of the fire in the water in the stories of Finn.[251] The image of illumination is also present in *immas foronsai* as "knowledge which illuminates".[252] Nonetheless, these terms seem to function independently outside of a context with a salmon of knowledge.

All these terms seem to be related to some form of divination by poets. According to Scott the *imbas forosnai* was a part of the standard divination skills ascribed to poets.[253] The divination aspect of the *imbas forosnai* is elaborated upon in Cormac's glossary. In the entry on *imbas forosnai* a supposed ritual is described that would involve chewing raw animal meats.[254] Some of these raw meets such as cat and dog, according to Nagy, might have been taboo to eat.[255] Nagy believes that this chewing of taboo meat represents a strong connection between liminality and the process of *imbas forosnai*. Supposedly, by only chewing but not eating the raw meet the morsel of flesh is put in an ultimate liminal state, between edible and inedible and between eaten and not eaten.[256] The concept of liminality is interesting for our purpose because the liminal state of a salmon is something others have commented on before.[257] However, in this divination ritual liminality may be a significant element but a salmon is not.

Imbas has also appeared frequently in our corpus of stories.[258] In the Book of Leinster version of the story of Sinann, for example, *imbas* is mentioned in relation to the Segais. Namely the text says:

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[249] "Boyish Exploits", p.186.
[250] "Boyish Exploits", p.186.
[251] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.216.
[252] "Boyish Exploits", p.185-186.
[253] Scott 1930, p.101.
[254] O'Donovan 1868, p.94.
[255] "Liminality and Knowledge", p.136.
[256] "Liminality and Knowledge", p.136.
[257] Sax 2001, p.212.
[258] See also Table 2 in the Appendix for further reference.

"Immas na Segsa".[259] *Immas* here is a form of *imbas*. Gwyn translates this *immas* as "magic-lore".[260] This is also one of the definitions that can be found in the eDIL along with "fore-knowledge", "inspiration", and "poetic knowledge".[261] In some versions of the Dindshenchas of Sinann druidic magic is involved with the hazel trees which carry *imbas*.[262] *Imbas* could thus mean magic or occult knowledge.

However, that would not entirely cover the meaning of the poetic knowledge that *imbas* seems to hold. *Imbas* is not specifically magic knowledge in opposition to the worldly knowledge of *fis*. In Macalister's translation of the *Lebor Gabála, fis* is a part of a list of skills including, druidry, prophecy, and magic.[263] Moreover, this poetic aspect that is seemingly a part of the definition of *imbas* does not necessarily have to be magical. The poetic skills gained by Finn in the *Macgnímartha* are given the general term *fis*, with *immas forosnai* being a part of this knowledge.[264] It then appears that neither *fis* nor *imbas* necessarily implies magic, though both have the capacity to. Therefore, I would conclude that poetic knowledge is a more apt definition for *imbas* then magical knowledge.

Furthermore, Finn's characterization as a wise man depends on his abilities as a poet and a seer.[265] In several places in the tradition Finn is known as a skilled poet, and Finn learns truths through poetry by biting his finger and reciting a *teinm laéda*.[266] Moreover, *teinm laéda* seems to be more frequently associated with Finn's knowledge then *imbas forosnai*.[267] Perhaps, the element of music or composition present in the *teinm laéda* would have been a more significant element in the context of the *Macgnímartha* as Finn is attempting to become a poet.[268]

Poetic knowledge also returns in the Dindshenchas of Sinann with a description of a hazel which is haunted by the music of poets.[269] In the metrical *Sinann I*, the exact thing that the nuts produce upon

[259] Gwynn 1913, p.286.
[260] Gwynn 1913, p.287. See also Table 2 in the Appendix.
[261] eDIL s.v. 1 imbas, imbus.
[262] Gwynn 1913, p.292.
[263] Macalister vol 4 (1941), p.166-67.
[264] Meyer "Macgnímartha Find" 1882, p.201.
[265] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.xiv. O'Rahilly 1971, p.323. While visions of the future are sometimes also associated with Finn, language surrounding him focusses more on seeing a truth or revealing a fact. Dooley and Roe 1999, p.9.
[266] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.xiv and "Boyish Exploits" p.186.
[267] Scott 1930, p.259.
[268] "Boyish Exploits" p.185.
[269] Gwynn 1913, p.287.

hitting the water is *céol-éicse*.[270] The word *éicse* can be translated as wisdom, even "wisdom from divination", but also as "poetic learning".[271] C*eol* means "music" or "musical".[272] Gwyn translates *céol-éicse* as "musical lore".[273] Connected to this poetic wisdom is the idea of musical knowledge, as also pointed out by Nagy in connection to Senbecc.[274] Knowledge and composition are also associated with each other in *The Hawk of Achill*. In *The Hawk* Fintan's knowledge is referenced in several different ways, some of them poetic such as his epithet of "the one of fair speech".[275] Importantly, he is also referred to as a poet and a prophet: "os tussa in fili 'san fáidh" or alternatively "is tu an fisigh 'san fáidh".[276] Music is also reflected in some of the nuts of *imbas* we find in our corpus as they are referred to as nuts of composition and science.[277] Poetic and musical knowledge thus seems to be a repeating element in all our texts. This indicates that science and music were not entirely separate elements in Irish culture.

Eicsi is also used in combination with *imbas* in several versions of the Sinann story. In a description of the well in the Bodleian manuscript we find the following:

> "i. tipra fo'tait cuill & immais n-eicsi & colla ai & imsa écsi uasa"[278]
>
> At the well there is a hazel, and poetic knowledge, and a hazel of poetic inspiration, and poetry is above it.[279]

While *eicsi* could be translated as "bright" in this context, I believe it is more likely translated as "poetic learning".[280] The *Rennes Dindshenchas* holds a similar passage except it ends differently with: "Tipra sin fo'tat cuill & imbois na heicsi .i. cuill crinmoind aiusa."[281] The last part might translate to something

[270] Gwynn 1913, p.288.
[271] eDIL s.v. éicse.
[272] eDIL s.v. ceól.
[273] Gwynn 1913, p.289.
[274] "Otter, Salmon, and Eel" 1985/86, p.129.
[275] Runge 2020, II.
[276] Runge 2020, XII.
[277] "Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise", p.213-214. And O'Donovan 1868, p.35.
[278] "Bodleian", p.497.
[279] My translation.
[280] eDIL s.v. éicsi? And eDIL s.v. éicside.
[281] "Rennes", p.456.

like: “the poetic hazels of Crinmond”. *Cuill crinmouind* is a term for the nuts also used in the metrical Dindshenchas in *Sinann I* meaning “the nuts of Crinmoind”.[282] These nuts in the story of Sinann are clearly from a hazel but the exact meaning of *crinmouind* is unclear.[283] In *Sinann II* they are referred to as the nuts of Crimall the sage, so it is likely that Crinmond is also a name.[284] Interestingly, in *the Hawk*, Fintan also plants nuts (*cnú*) from paradise in Ireland.[285] We can thus see a clear presence and importance of nuts in relation to *imbas* and wisdom.

The well that these nuts grow next to is also possibly referred to with different terms of knowledge. The *Bodleian Dindshenchas* uses the phrase *sruth Frithrosc,* which Stokes renders “well of knowledge” but which may also be stream of obtained sight or obtained poetry.[286] The *Rennes Dindshenchas* does not use this phrasing it only refers to a stream of wisdom, *srotha éicsi*.[287] The knowledge that can be found in these wells is described in the Sinann texts as *imbas*. Both texts agree that Sinann wanted *imbas* because she only wanted wisdom/knowledge.

Importantly, while we have seen different terms for knowledge and wisdom in these stories, we have not seen salmon being referred to as “wise”. Even when salmon appear in our corpus, they are also not always directly connected with the *imbas* from the Dindshenchas. In *Sinann II*, Sinann specifically came to seek the *imbas* before she was drowned, not the salmon swimming in the well.[288] The hazelnuts that appear in the “well” stories are more directly connected with *imbas* than any salmon are.[289] Thus, while the salmon appears in passages where *imbas* is the main type of wisdom, a salmon is never directly connected with this *imbas*.

Wisdom or knowledge

Whether it is wisdom or knowledge that Sinann seeks, appears to be rather open to the interpretation of the translator. There are several instances across our corpus where there is no one clear

[282] Gwynn 1913, p.288-289.
[283] eDIL s.v. crínmonn
[284] Gwynn 1913, p.293.
[285] Runge 2020, LXXXII, LXXXIII.
[286] “Bodleian”, p.479-498.
[287] “Rennes”, p.456.
[288] Gwynn 1913, p.295.
[289] Gwynn 1913, p.295.

translation for a term. For example, in the first recension of the *Lebor Gabála, fis* and *eolas* are given as "knowledge" and "science" respectively by Macalister. However, *eolas* also seems to be used separately for knowledge, at least in Macalister's translations, as he has also translated the word as both "wisdom" and "knowledge".[290] Moreover, Stokes also renders the two different forms of *imbas* with two different translations. He translates it as "lore" in the *Bodleian Dindshenchas* and "inspiration" in the *Rennes Dindshenchas*.[291] These and further examples in Table 2 in the Appendix show that a translation of wisdom and knowledge is not necessarily depended on the Irish term but rather on the judgement of the translator.

Thus, we are left with the question, are we seeing references to wisdom or knowledge? The use of words such as *fis* in relation to the salmon seems to point more towards the use of knowledge.[292] *Imbas*, a word often associated with the well story and thus with poetry, also seems to mean knowledge, fore-knowledge, and inspiration. From this it would seem that "salmon of knowledge" is at least the most appropriate translation. Yet, the knowledge gained by consuming the salmon, or by being an ancient salmon, would seem to be a type of wisdom and not knowledge. Thus, there is still an argument to be made for the use of the term "salmon of wisdom". Perhaps, the issue I have with these terms is because of the difference I, as a modern reader, envision between wisdom and knowledge. This might not have been perceived the same way by the Medieval Irish reader or listener.[293]

I understand knowledge as learned, studied, and read knowledge. Wisdom, to me, refers more to intuition and judgement. It is the difference between common knowledge and conventional wisdom, facts we all known and beliefs we all share. You have knowledge of something and wisdom to do something. Intuition is thus also based on wisdom rather than knowledge. This, I believe, to some extent is also how wisdom is interpreted in the stories of the "old salmon". There, wisdom is based on lived experience and lived history that can be passed down, not on learned knowledge. Even today we use this definition of wisdom in adages such as "older and wiser" and "wisdom comes with age". Experience in a craft however, as with skilled workers such as smiths or painters, is not connected with wisdom

[290] Macalister vol 2 (1939), p.107 and 169.
[291] "Bodleian" p.497-498, "Rennes" p.456-457.
[292] eDIL s.v. 1 fis, fius
[293] Ong 2013, p.2.

because they are taught skills. These craftsmen have knowledge of their skills, not wisdom of their skills. Music and poetry actually exist in a middle ground of these terms. Musical knowledge is learned, but musical intuition or a "feel" for the music is closer to wisdom.

This intuition leads us to question some elements regarding animals. Certain natural habits of the salmon have also been brought up to identify the wisdom of the salmon.[294] The salmon can find its way back to where it was born, something that certainly seems wise. However, this is instinct. We generally do not regard acting on instinct to be a wise decision. It would be good to question whether this was also the case in Medieval Irish culture. Is the salmon's ability to swim back to its birth stream even considered as a wise quality or is something else imagined that draws them back? Do animals have their own type of wisdom, or do they possess a humanoid type of wisdom?[295]

Keeping this in mind we can consider how the Irish viewed wisdom and knowledge. The *Cauldron of Poetry* can perhaps aide in our understanding of this difference. This poem is found in a 16th century manuscript.[296] In this text knowledge and poetry are not connected. Instead, wisdom is being connected with poetry. One example of this in the poem is the word *soas*, a form of *sous* meaning knowledge in the sense of scientific and poetic learning.[297] In the text there are three cauldrons, one of grammar, one of poetry, and one of the other arts. The text is mostly concerned with the second cauldron the *Coire Émrai*, according to Breatnach this is the cauldron of poetry.[298] This cauldron does not distribute knowledge (*soas*) but it converts it as a stage between the first cauldron and the last *Coire Sofis* (translated by Breatnach as "the cauldron of knowledge").[299] This last cauldron gives a person knowledge of all skills and art, except poetry.[300] Thus, we do see a distinction being made here between different types, or grades, of knowledge.

[294] "Liminality and Knowledge", p.140.
[295] For a further discussion see Salter, David. *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature*. Boydell & Brewer, 2001. And Salisbury, Joyce E. *The beast within: Animals in the Middle Ages*. Routledge, 2012.
[296] Breatnach 1981, p.46.
[297] eDIL s.v. sous. Breathnach 1981, p.64.
[298] Breatnach 1981, p.49.
[299] Breatnach 1981, p.63.
[300] Breatnach 1981, p.49.

In this text the final level of poetry that can be achieved is the acquisition of *imbas*. This *imbas*, according to the text, is found at the end of the Segais from nine hazels every seventh year, at the Boyne.[301]

"Ar-caun Coire nÉrmai
intlechtaib raith
rethaib sofis
srethaib imbais,
indber n-ecnai
ellach suithi"[302]

"I acclaim the Cauldron of Ermae
with understandings of grace
with accumulations of knowledge
with strewings of imbas,
(which is) the estuary of wisdom
the uniting of scholars"[303]

Another thing that flows from that cauldron is *eicne*, translated as "wisdom".[304] Moreover, scholars (*Suithi*) are mentioned in the same breath here as knowledge and understanding, and possibly inspiration. As such it seems that the distinction we often make between wisdom and knowledge is not entirely as clear in Irish literature.

As John Carey has noted, Irish texts seem to have viewed the power of language in direct connection with the power of poetry.[305] Poetry was regarded as truth, and history as knowledge.[306] Therefore, inspiration was closely connected with knowledge. As such, inspiration in the form of poetry

[301] Breatnach 1981, p.67.
[302] Breatnach 1981, p.68.
[303] Breatnach 1981, p.69.
[304] Breatnach 1981, p.69
[305] Carey "Native elements in Irish pseudohistory." 1995, p.60.
[306] Nagy *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* 2018, p.9.

was a form of enlightenment and information as it allowed the poet to speak truth.[307] If we presume that in an oral society the people who are the keepers of memory are also the keepers of all knowledge and information, then it is not difficult to imagine the *Fili*, the poets of Ireland, to be inherently filled with knowledge and wisdom.[308] Especially with characters such as Fintan, it appears that his status as an absolute authority on Irish history is both because of the knowledge he has witnessed and his ability to express his witness.[309] Moreover, poets such as Amairgin also function as judges and find the truth in their words reflected in the just decisions of their judgement.[310]

Perhaps, "wisdom" and "knowledge" are used interchangeably in English translations because the Irish themselves never did have a specific distinction of the terms in mind. The Irish audience might have imagined the difference between knowledge and wisdom to be of an entirely different nature. Alternatively, we might be unable to grasp a slight difference in the use of these Irish words. Our translations might lack a term in-between wisdom and knowledge that we cannot properly render into modern languages because our cultures of learning and passing down knowledge are different. Old-Irish culture would have different views on memory, and the communities and use of knowledge, than we do.

Walter Ong is among those who caution that our modern sensibilities are very different from that of the Medieval societies.[311] He emphasizes that learning and passing down knowledge or wisdom in non-literate, or at least semi-literate societies, works vastly different than it does in modern literate society.[312] This learning is not based on studying or reading but on doing and experiencing. In such a society, experiences, including apprenticeships, may still be forms of formal learning. While we find our texts in literate spaces, the societies that produced them where still concerned with orality.[313] Therefore, our understanding of knowledge as learned, read, and written information, in opposition to wisdom gained from experience and intuition, may not be entirely applicable to Medieval Irish society. As Elva Johnston also shows, in Medieval Ireland one of the most learned groups of people, the *Fili*,

[307] O'Rourke 2017, p.4.
[308] Stevenson 1995, p.21-22.
[309] Bondarenko 2012, p.132
[310] Carey "Native elements in Irish pseudohistory." 1995, p.58.
[311] Ong 2013, p.2.
[312] Ong 2013, p.9.
[313] Dooley 2004, p.122.

still passed down their knowledge in mostly oral forms.[314] Musical knowledge, even in our modern times, might be a good example of this. We know it requires experience and feeling as much as it requires studying and reading. I believe poetry in Medieval Ireland likely functioned in a similar way to this notion of music composition; a skill based on study and practice as well as on inspiration and intuition.

Thus, I do believe that the type of knowledge the salmon is connected with is that of poetry. The poetic connections between *imbas* to me represent a very strong argument for that. Another argument for that is that the words that are used in our texts, as can be seen in Table 2 in the Appendix, mostly reflect acquired or "learned" knowledge.[315] Such knowledge, or information, is the territory of learned people such as the *Fili*. Therefore, I do prefer the term salmon of knowledge to represent the learned poetic knowledge the salmon supposedly represents. Nevertheless, the use of salmon of wisdom remains a valid alternative. This is because poetry does not belong to either knowledge or wisdom, but to both.

[314] Johnston 2013, p.46.
[315] P.108-114 below.

4. Other Aspects of the Salmon

Even though there is little evidence for a salmon of knowledge in medieval Irish literature, the salmon in Irish culture is usually interpreted in only one way; as symbolically related to wisdom and knowledge. Patricia Monaghan for example in *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* says that salmon in Irish literature are invariably a symbol of wisdom.[316] In *the Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* we find the statement that: "The salmon in Celtic and Germanic belief [is] a primordial being and repository of ancient lore, e.g. the "salmon of knowledge" which is frequently found in Irish tales".[317] Yet, as we have already seen that is not necessarily true. Moreover, this repetition of the concept of a salmon of wisdom can create an almost circular way of reasoning: because the salmon of knowledge exists in Irish literature all salmon in Irish literature must relate to knowledge. Thus, the concept of the salmon of knowledge is now frequently connected to all salmon in Irish texts. Moreover, knowledge and wisdom appear to be the only explanation required to interpret the role of salmon in Irish culture. This lack of diversity in the discussion on the salmon is one of the problems caused by the exclusive focus on knowledge in connection to salmon.

Alongside these standard interpretations, some Celtic scholars have previously discussed other associations with salmon. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore these wider associations and different possibilities for the interpretation of salmon in Irish literature. Discovering these alternative interpretations will reveal that the salmon in Irish literature exists in a much larger context than simply as the salmon of knowledge. To aid in this interpretation we will also consider the historical impact of the natural world and the salmon on Irish culture.

The natural world

Perhaps it is wise to first briefly turn to the natural qualities of the Atlantic salmon, the salmon species native to Ireland. Understanding these natural qualities will provide some of the cultural context within which the salmon existed in Irish literature. The Atlantic salmon is the dominant salmon species

[316] Monaghan 2004, p.405.
[317] Mallory and Adams 1997, p.497.

in Europe and parts of North America.[318] The salmon is a freshwater fish as well as a saltwater fish. Salmon lay their eggs in freshwater streams, after these eggs hatch they spend the first stage of their lives slowly moving to a larger body of water, mostly to sea.[319] This next stage of their lives is spent within the sea where they rapidly grow to an adult size. After a period at sea, salmon return to the streams that they themselves hatched from and mate again where they were born. Many salmon do not survive this migration and do not return to the sea.[320] Some scholars speculate that it is the liminal aspects of the salmon's natural life cycle that connects them with knowledge.[321] The salmon is also known for its great jumping ability which is sometimes necessary to make the journey up-stream in the migration season.[322] This migration season takes place in the summer.[323] In the Medieval era fishing seems to mostly have happened on a smaller scale using fish traps that operated with the tides. As such much of this fishing activity was present at estuaries and river mouths.[324] As salmon are migratory fish it would perhaps seem contrary that they feature so frequently in Irish stories without specification of season. This is at least the case in our corpus for the fish living in the Boyne and in the otherworldly pools, though the migratory aspect of the salmon may be reflected in the tales of *Momera* and the *Coir Anmann*. However, salmon are also often confused with the trout, a fish that swims in rivers all year round.

Salmon and trout are very closely related in genetics, belonging to the same family.[325] The scientific name for the Atlantic salmon is the *salmo salar* and the name for the brown trout is *salmo trutta* for example. In addition to a migratory sea trout a non-migratory brown trout is common in Irish waters all year round.[326] The confusion between these two fish is very prevalent, even in modern times these two fish are easily mistaken.[327] The confusion in literature has also previously been noted by scholars.[328] In one Scottish version of how Finn got his wisdom it is even said that he got wisdom after

[318] Greenhalgh 2005, p.7.
[319] Thorstad et all. 2011, p.1.
[320] Thorstad et all. 2011, p.1.
[321] Monaghan 2004, p.405.
[322] Greenhalgh 2005, p.4.
[323] O'Sullivan 2005, p.70.
[324] O'sullivan 2005, p.72.
[325] Greenhalgh 2005, p.7.
[326]Griffiths 1997, p.9.
[327] Greenhalgh 2005, p.8.
[328] Petrovskaia 2018, p.141.

cooking a trout.[329] A trout is also usually the fish with a speckled belly.[330] A natural history publication from 1804 for example includes the purple-spotted *Salmo eriox* among salmon.[331] More modern publications would treat this species, *Salmo trutta eriox,* as a brown trout.[332] This confusion, or conflation, between these two fish is also to some extent found in the language used to describe these fish.

The term most used for salmon in our corpus seems to be *bratán*. Though some variation exists, such as within the term *eó fis*. The definition of *bratán* in the eDIL is given as a fish that is frequently salmon, but it does not necessarily have to be salmon.[333] The word *eó* is more specifically translated as salmon.[334] In *The Hawk of Achill* the word *egne*, which must be a version of *éicne*, is used for salmon.[335] *Éicne* is given in eDIL as most specifically salmon, but it can also be used to refer to fish in general, a religious symbol, or even heroes.[336] This connection with heroes is also repeated in *bratán*.[337] The possibility for these terms to refer to fish in general, and the confusion between salmon and trout, thus make it a possibility that in some of the texts we have discussed a trout is meant instead of a salmon.

If we specifically look for trout, eDIL provides us with *brecc* to mean a speckled fish usually translated as trout.[338] We do not often find this word in our texts. It does, however, form part of the name for the grandfather of Senbecc, Eibrecc. The first part of this name could also be a form of *é*, salmon.[339] It is possible that the name means something like "little salmon or trout" if we take the last part of the name to be *bec*, "Little".[340] If we take *brecc* as the adjective "speckled" we might get "speckled salmon/trout". These different possibilities show that there is at least room for ambiguity within the terms of salmon and trout.

[329] Heinz 1999, p.135.
[330] Greenhalgh 2005, p.8.
[331] Shaw 1826, p.47.
[332] Jonsson and Jonsson 2011, p.43.
[333] eDIL s.v. bratán.
[334] eDIL s.v. 1 eó, eú.
[335] Runge 2020, XIV.
[336] eDIL s.v. éicne.
[337] eDIL s.v. bratán.
[338] eDIL s.v. 1 brecc.
[339] eDIL s.v. 4 é.
[340] eDIL s.v. bec. This was pointed out to me by Micheal O'Flaithearta in a personal comment.

Salmon are also frequently used without any metaphorical meaning. As elements of nature salmon can be markers of abundance or the beauty of a natural environment.[341] In the *Lebor Gabála* salmon appear in many descriptions of the environment and the riches found in certain locations.[342] Even in the *Acallam* we see that salmon are used to explain the division of food.[343] As such the abundance of salmon in literary appearances may simply reflect the abundance and value of salmon in medieval Ireland. Natalia Petrovskaia also supports this notion that salmon were, among other things in literature, natural symbols of beauty and a rich environment.[344] As we have already seen the salmon made up a large part of Ireland's fish supplies. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine that when thinking about fish, whether in the river or the ocean, the salmon would have seemed like an abundant fish at the forefront of people's minds.

Moyle and Moyle have also suggested that fish appeared more in the art and imagery of places where fish were of greater importance, without necessarily representing a fixed cultural symbolism.[345] As such the inclusion of the fish in descriptions of special places could be explained as simply showing how marvelous a location and its natural resources are. Salmon imagery in art might also provide us with more examples of what role the salmon played in medieval Irish culture. For example,

[341] Petrovskaia 2018, p.140.
[342] Macalister Vol 2 (1939), p.263 and p.331.
[343] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.72.
[344] Petrovskaia 2018, p.140.
[345] Moyle and Moyle 1991, p.6.

images of fish appear in the Book of Kells, possibly associated with Jesus Christ.[346] This fish might be the salmon, but with medieval art this cannot be stated conclusively.

Figure 1 detail of the Chi Ro Page, folio 34r of the Book of Kells. Courtesy of the Library of Trinity College Digital Collections.

Figure 2 detail of folio 179v. Courtesy of the Library of Trinity College Digital Collections.

In eDIL there is also a reference to the use of *éicne* in religious contexts.[347]

Derek Bryce doubts the use of the salmon as part of Christian symbolism, he believes that the fish appearing on many standing stones in Scotland are salmon reflective of "shamanistic practices".[348]

[346] Lewis 1980, p.144.
[347] eDIL s.v. éicne.
[348] Bryce 2002, p.44.

In contrast, Anthony Jackson does not classify salmon on these standing stones as a mythical animals, rather he classifies them as edible.[349] The presence of fish in art at least shows that it had a presence in the mind of people in some way. In places where salmon was abundant, such as in Scotland, images of the fish appear. Thus, the presence of salmon in daily life should account for some of its abundant presence in literature.[350] The abundant presence of salmon in literature may be reflected in the abundance of salmon as a food source in medieval Ireland.

Salmon as food

We know that salmon was part of the Irish diet. As a food source salmon seems to go back to neolithic times when salmonoid fish were an important food for the people of Ireland.[351] If the salmon was the most important fish for the medieval Irish diet remains to be seen as references to fishing do not necessarily mention salmon specifically.[352] Though Sabine Heinz does present salmon as the most important fish in Ireland and the most important food in Irish literature.[353] Christopher Moriarty would certainly include the salmon as a food source of almost mythical status, as an abundant resource even in late winter and early spring.[354] We might then also imagine that great value was ascribed to salmon in the middle ages.[355] Some scholars have even gone so far as to claim that salmon was an integral part of the fish-oriented economic system of the early Irish.[356] Richard Hoffman has also shown that salmon was of great economic value in the later middle ages due to their increasing scarcity in parts of Europe except Ireland and Scotland.[357] It is possible that salmon might have been a popular Lenten food because water-animals were eaten on days without meat.[358] Therefore, salmon were not just present in the natural environment of Ireland. Salmon were also very present, or at least noticeable, as an edible and economic resource.

[349] Jackson 1990, p.111
[350] Petrovskaia 2018, p.140.
[351] Overton and Taylor 2018, p.387.
[352] Peters 2015, p.100.
[353] Heinz 1999, p.131.
[354] Moriarty 1998, p.284.
[355] Hoffman 2005, p.356.
[356] Overton and Taylor 2018, p.387.
[357] Hoffman 2005, p.356.
[358] Hoffman 2005, p.337. Peters 2015, p.93.

At least according to some theories, salmon appear to be a status food.[359] In legal texts, it appears that salmon is a food meant for high status persons.[360] Hoffman also shows that fishing privileges for salmon rivers were important to medieval Scottish kings.[361] We also know that, in literature, salmon is consumed by nobility, such as the queen who eats Tuan in his salmon shape. Furthermore, the salmon is included with other "noble" hunted animals in the shapes of Tuan as a Stag, Boar, and Hawk. The first two of which were almost certainly animals with high status as targets of a noble hunt.[362] It thus seems likely that salmon were also status symbols or symbols of the rich.[363] Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire even claims that the salmon was the king of fish.[364]

As a status-symbol salmon becomes an almost legendary type of food. There are several Irish foods which hold that almost mythical status, milk (and subsequently butter) is one, honey is another.[365] Monaghan even classifies butter as a mythical object.[366] Interestingly, there also exists a story where a poet named Carrol O'Daly gains some form of supernatural knowledge from the milk of a certain cow.[367] Ó hÓgáin believes this legend may have originated in the 14th or 15th century.[368] This shows that salmon is not the only food source imagined to grant knowledge. Moreover, as we shall see in chapter 7 below, the bee also has some association with wisdom. It is thus interesting to see that the other, presumably, important foods in the Irish diet, milk and honey, also have some associations with wisdom. We also known both foods from modern sayings such as "the land of milk and honey" to indicate a place of great plenty.[369] In Irish descriptions of such places we might be able to add salmon to the list.

Heroic salmon

One of the natural qualities of salmon that is sometimes represented in Irish literature is the salmon's great leaping ability as emblematic of strength and prowess. A. J. Hughes shows that salmon

[359] Mac Coitir 2015, p.210.
[360] Mac Coitir 2015, p.211.
[361] Hoffman 2005, p.355-356.
[362] Judkins 2013, p.70 and 79.
[363] Hoffman 2005, 355-356.
[364] Mac Con Iomaire 2006, p.221.
[365] Peters 2015, p.92.
[366] Monaghan 2004, 65.
[367] Ó Súilleabháin and Christiansen 1963, p.138.
[368] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.336.
[369] See also the title of Bríd Mahon's 1998 book *Land of milk and honey: the story of traditional Irish food and drink* for reference.

were often used to describe warriors and kings. This was not because they were wise or tactical but because they were vigorous and fierce.[370] Nagy would also agree that salmon were "emblematic of martial valour and strength".[371] Some of the usages of *éicne* could also be considered in this context.[372] Cú Chulainn's salmon leap could likewise be an example of this strength and valour.[373] In other instances, poetic idioms connected to salmon describe kings and warriors in their best martial capacity. This is done along the lines of the qualities of the natural animal itself, its fast swimming and its impressive leaping. These descriptions include specific rivers such as the Boyne and the Shannon.[374] Admittedly, most of Hughes examples are later than our medieval corpus. However, the association with Cú Chulainn's salmon leap could point to a medieval precedence for the idea. There is also a story in which Cú Chulainn slays a figure named Cú Roí. Part of Cú Roí's soul is contained within a salmon. By killing the salmon Cú Roí's strength is drained away.[375] The idea of strength being associated with salmon is thus established in several texts. We can then conclude that strength and heroism were two aspects associated with the salmon in medieval Ireland.

In more modern folk tradition, the salmon would appear to be associated with health and physical strength as well.[376] *Bratán* also seems to be used to mean life and spirit.[377] Niall Mac Coitir finds it just as likely that the long lives of Fintan and Tuan connect the salmon with qualities of health as that it is connected with knowledge.[378] As Mac Coitir shows it is equally possible to pair qualities of strength and longevity with salmon as it is with knowledge or wisdom. Strength and valor as aspects of the salmon are then just as attested as elements of the knowledge. Moreover, Cu Chulainn's heroic salmon's leap is easily associated with the salmon's natural ability. An ability that in some tales is even said to be given to the salmon by Saint Patrick himself.[379] Thus, it is not the case that any salmon appearing in Irish literature is automatically related to knowledge.

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[370] Hughes 1996, p.18.
[371] "Otter, salmon, and eel in traditional Gaelic narrative", p.128.
[372] eDIL s.v. éicne.
[373] "Otter, salmon, and eel in traditional Gaelic narrative", p.128.
[374] Hughes 1996, p.19-20.
[375] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.141.
[376] Mac Coitir 2015, p.207.
[377] eDIL s.v. bratán.
[378] Mac Coitir 2015, p.208.
[379] Mac Coitir 2015, p.207.

Just a salmon

Considering all the above it is clear that instances of fishing for, and eating of, the salmon appear in different stories. But exact knowledge of how people in medieval Ireland thought of this fish is lacking. In the many different appearances of the salmon in literature we come across different qualities that the salmon can inhabit. Yet, there is no singular quality that seems to define the salmon. Moreover, I am not currently aware of any reference in medieval Irish literature that gives the salmon an attribute as opposed to using the salmon as an attribute. In other words, no text refers to the clever salmon they do refer to people as golden salmon. The only consistent element in all of these different appearances is that the salmon is looked upon favorably.

Furthermore, there are plenty of descriptions where the salmon is simply a salmon, a fish that shows the riches of Irish rivers. A fish that is highly valued not for any mythical reasons but for its economic benefit. Many mythological encyclopedias will offer the simplification that the salmon was a sacred animal and mythic figure in Ireland.[380] But if we look at the evidence above, we are left to question these statements. Certainly, it seems that salmon were an important animal. However, it remains difficult to say whether salmon were considered blessed with sacred knowledge. This is because the actual medieval material connecting salmon to knowledge is rather patchy, yet the scholarly material connecting salmon to knowledge is abundant.

[380] Monaghan 2004, p.405. Green 1993, p.191.

5. Surprisingly Little Material

As we have already seen in the preceding chapters, in our corpus of thirteen Irish texts there is no evidence for a unified medieval notion of a salmon of knowledge. Not only has the term *eó fis* been scantly attested, the concept of a salmon of knowledge is not a prevalent element in medieval stories either. Within our corpus we see only three examples of a salmon connected to knowledge directly, within the *Macgnímartha*, *Feis*, and *Sinann II*. Moreover, as we have seen in the chapters above, much of the other material that is often used to point to the existence of the salmon of knowledge is thinner on the ground then one would expect. In this chapter I would like to analyze how scholars have previously discussed the salmon of knowledge, and I would like to review the evidence that is often given by scholars to prove the existence of the salmon of knowledge. By doing this we might also discover why scholars talk about the salmon of knowledge so frequently despite the scarcity of the evidence.

The most well-known and popular story that scholars point to including the salmon of knowledge is the *Macgnímartha*.[381] This story would seem like a clear narrative example of the salmon of knowledge because Finn eats a salmon that grants him poetic knowledge and skill. There is no discussion here that this salmon is the direct cause of how Finn receives his wisdom. This is supported by the language that the text uses when the prophecy is related; that nothing would remain unknown to the person who would eat this particular salmon.[382] However, the problem is that his is our only clear narrative example of a salmon of knowledge. Moreover, this salmon is only ever referred to in the text as the salmon of Fec's pool. Nowhere in the text do we find a reference to this salmon as the salmon of knowledge, or *eó fis*. Regardless of the lack of consistent terms or story elements the *Macgnímartha* is often connected to the Dindshenchas tales that are supposed to form the origin story of the salmon of knowledge.[383]

This supposed connection is based on scholarly connections of the tale, as they assume that the salmon near the nuts of *imbas* in *Sinann II* are the same salmon that swim in the Boyne in the

[381] Mackillop 1985, p.xi. We can also see this in the way that the salmon of knowledge is usually explained along the lines of the *Macgnímartha* story.
[382] "Boyish Exploits", p.186.
[383] This is also something we have seen from the discussion in the Introduction above.

Macgnímartha. These links are not made directly in the tales themselves. Even if some connections, such as the appearance of the Segais, can be used to link the tales surrounding the Boyne and Shannon, this Segais is not necessarily where the salmon originates. Yet, we connect it to the salmon of knowledge far too freely and without precaution. These associations are based on equating tales with each other that are not entirely equal. For example, Sinann and Boand are often equated so that everything true about the tale of Sinann also becomes true about the tale of Boand.[384] Yet, this only applies to the story elements that fit in with our image of what the story should be. The Dindshenchas of Boand, in some versions, is focused on the adulteress relationship and birth of Óengus as the driving force of the story, rather than wisdom. Yet, it is not claimed often that Sinann should also be seen as an adulteress on the assumption that these two tales are essentially the same, because there is no basis for this assumption. Still, scholars will say that the pool at the head of the Boyne functions the same as it does in the story of Sinann, the origin story of the Shannon.[385] Moreover, scholars continually suggest that the salmon in the *Macgnímartha* is the same salmon that swims in some versions of the Dindshenchas of Sinann.[386] The link between these tales is that a knowledge giving salmon appears in the *Macgnímartha* and salmon appear in relation to nuts of *imbas* in the tale of Sinann. According to scholars, the salmon eat these nuts of *imbas* and become the salmon of knowledge.[387] The origin story of the salmon that is often used then, that salmon of knowledge appear at a well at the head of the Boyne, is a scholarly construct not one evident in the medieval material.[388]

[384] Ó hÓgáin 1988, p.57 for example
[385] Beck 2015, p.290. Hazelnuts appear in relation to both rivers but there is still no connection with a salmon in these tales. The salmon of knowledge supposedly swimming in the Boyne in the *Macgnímartha* is the only thing that connects these tales.
[386] Early examples of this are Whitely Stokes in his editions of the Dindshenchas and O'Donovan in his and Stokes' edition of *Cormac's Glossary*. "Rennes", p.457. O'Donovan 1868, p.35. For one of the more modern references see also Nagy in *wisdom of the outlaw* p.137, who, among others, refers back to Stokes' edition of the *Rennes Dindshenchas* to make his connection. Another similar interpretation is made by Daithí Ó hÓgáin in *Fionn mac Cumhaill images of the Gaelic Hero* 1988, p.57. O'Rahilly refers, among others, to Thurneysen who also to the *Rennes Dindshenchas* by Stokes. O'Rahilly 1971 p.322-323. Thurneysen, Rudolf. " Zu Verslehre II." *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 17 (1928): 263-276.
[387] Green 1993, p.190-191.
[388] One example of this is McKillop 2004, p.228.

The effect of Stokes

The idea that the salmon of *Linn Feic* from the *Macgnímartha* consumed the nuts of *imbas* from the Dindshenchas might have been made more prevalent by the fact that Stokes' editions of the Dindshenchas make the salmon seem more of a stable factor in the tales than it actually is. If one only reads the translations of the *Bodleian* and *Rennes Dindshenchas* one might assume that salmon also appear in those manuscripts.

In Stokes' editions of the *Bodleian* and *Rennes Dindshenchas* the language of these two editions seems rather similar. There is however a passage including salmon that Stokes supplies from the Book of Lecan that is not present in the other two manuscripts.[389] This passage is as follows in his edition of the *Rennes Dindshenchas*: "co cocnaid na bradana in mes, conad he sug na cno cuirthear suas ina mbolcaib corcardaib".[390] In the *Bodleian Dindshenchas* it is thus: "co cocnait na bradain in mes sin, conad he sug na cnó cuirthear suas ina mbolcaib corcardaib*"*.[391] Stokes does not explain where the alternative reading in his *Bodleian* edition has come from, though from its appearance in brackets it is clearly an editorial addition. Without the alternative reading, the translation of Stokes from the *Bodleian Dindshenchas* reads: "In the same hour they [the nuts] fall in a single shower on the well and it raises purple bubbles […] And seven chief streams spring out of that well".[392] In his edition of the *Rennes Dindshenchas* he does explain that the passage originates in the Book of Lecan.[393] Moreover, in one of his notes in the edition of the *Bodleian Dindshenchas* he explains that he omits certain passages he finds irrelevant and that have no relation to any other existing Dindshenchas material.[394] It is thus also very likely that Stokes adds a passage that he believes is more relevant and in line with other extant copies of the Dindshenchas. Stokes supplies an alternative reading which includes the salmon in his additions because he believes it ought to be in the texts, because he believes this passage to be important.

[389] "Rennes", p.457 and "Bodleian", p.497. I can confirm from reviewing an image of the manuscript that it does not appear in the Book of Ballymote. I could not confirm that it does not appear in Trinity College MS 1322 as I do not have access to that manuscript.
[390] *"Rennes"*, p.457.
[391] "Bodleian", p.497.
[392] "Bodleian", p.498.
[393] "Rennes", p.457.
[394] "Bodleian", p.469.

When Stokes supplies these alternative readings it creates an emphasis on this salmon passage that does not reflect the majority of the extant texts.

Even if we only consider tales in which salmon actually do appear, the salmon's connection with wisdom and knowledge is sometimes far-fetched. In the *Acallam* a salmon does appear as a title for Finn, this title of golden salmon is the only thing that connects salmon to Finn's wisdom in this tale.[395] However, in the same text salmon is also part of a title for Saint Patrick.[396] Thus, the salmon in the *Acallam* is not exclusively associated with Finn. You could argue that Patrick and Finn both being named salmon shows a mutual association with wisdom. Patrick is also called "of the flowing pen" in the *Hawk of Achill,* hinting at Patrick's association with the written word. [397] Patrick might then also have some connotations with knowledge. However, a large part of the argument that Patrick's title of salmon here is connected to knowledge depends on the assumption that salmon are necessarily connected to knowledge. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this need not always be the case. Hughes has also pointed out that salmon is used as an epithet for many kings and chieftains in Irish writing without the connotation with knowledge or wisdom.[398] If we always assume that salmon are only representative of knowledge it could limit our understanding of the medieval texts.

Stokes in particular in his editions of the *Bodleian* and *Rennes Dindshenchas* is so convinced of the existence and importance of the salmon of knowledge that he adds an additional passage twice over into his editions.[399] This concept of the salmon of knowledge, however, did not originate with Stokes. If we trace back Stokes' references we are referred to other scholars such as John O'Donovan and O'Curry.[400] In O'Curry's notes from 1855 on the seventeenth century *Battle of Magh Leana*, he suggests that the origin of the concept of the salmon of knowledge is the Dindshenchas of Sinann.[401] A similar notion is brought up by O'Donovan, when he makes a note on the nuts of science included in Cormac's Glossary. In his translation of Cormac's glossary (which was edited by Stokes) we find the entry of *Ciall*

[395] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.78.
[396] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.5.
[397] Runge 2020, XXIX and the note on *Pátruic pen-réidh*.
[398] Hughes 1996, p.18.
[399] *"*Rennes*",* p.457 and "Bodleian", p.497.
[400] "Rennes*",* p.457.
[401] O'Curry 1855, p.xv and p.97.

Crínmon which O'Donovan translates as "hazels of scientific composition".[402] In a note on these hazelnuts O'Donovan recounts the story of Sinann, including a mention of salmon of knowledge.[403] The connection here seems to be the *Ciall Crínmon*, which might be similar to the *Cnói Crínmoínd* in *Sinann I*.[404] However, as we will remember salmon are not involved in *Sinann I* only in *Sinann II* where the hazelnuts are referred to as the nuts of Crimall.[405] It is clear then, that the one version of the tale of Sinann that does include salmon is taken as the most valid and important text, even when in reality other versions of Sinann can also be connected with the wider corpus of Irish texts.

Moreover, O'Curry also claims that the Irish poets often exclaimed: "if I had eaten of the salmon of knowledge" when they wished to be able to better express themselves.[406] O'Donovan similarly claims that we often meet such phrases about the salmon of knowledge in "ancient" poems.[407] However, neither of these scholars mention where the poets used to use this phrase. As far as I am able to tell, that occurs only once in *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit*. The relevant line in that poem translates to: "unless I had eaten the salmon of knowledge".[408] This, I believe, is the line that these scholars refer to.

These early scholars, to some extent, exaggerated the evidence and made the existence of a salmon of knowledge seem bigger. Moreover, it is my belief that this early exaggeration is also shown in the evidence often provided by modern scholars. These modern scholars continue to assume that the salmon of knowledge is an established fact and not a possible theory. Modern scholars tend to repeat the same origin story of the salmon of knowledge as Stokes, O'Donovan, and O'Curry,[409] to such an extent that some scholars like Ó hÓgáin conflate some of the texts.[410] Thus, the medieval evidence does not support the salmon of knowledge concept as we know it today.

When salmon do appear in medieval stories in a context with wisdom, they are swimming in the pool of *Segais* where nuts of *imbas* drop into the water. While it is often said that the salmon of

[402] O'Donovan 1868, p.35.
[403] O'Donovan 1868, p.35.
[404] Gwynn 1913, p.288.
[405] Gwynn 1913, p.293.
[406] O'Curry 1855, p.97.
[407] O'Donovan 1968, p.35.
[408] See p.41 above.
[409] See for example, Beck 2015, p.290 and Berresford Ellis 1987, p.184-185.
[410] Ó hÓgáin equates a couple of things and seems to believe the plot of *Sinann II* to belong to the Dindshenchas of Boand. 1988, p.57.

knowledge eat these nuts and thus become the carrier of knowledge, this is not necessarily the case. If we review Stokes's edition of the *Rennes Dindshenchas,* he translates the additional passage as follows:

> "co cocnaid na bradana in mes, conad he sug na cno cuirthear suas ina mbolcaib corcardaib"[411]

> "Then the salmon chew the fruit, and the juice of the nuts is apparent on their purple bellies."[412]

However, in my opinion, there is a possible alternative translation in the section after Stokes' comma. The particular word I am concerned with is *bolcaib.* This word could be a form of *bolg* meaning belly or stomach.[413] However, Atlantic Salmon are not generally speckled on their bellies, trout are.[414] The text uses the term *bratán* which usually means salmon but could refer to fish in general or also trout. Therefore, the speckled bellies could still be a possible aspect of the fish, but we would just have the wrong fish. However, I believe a different translation of *bolcaib* to be more likely.

The other possible translation for *bolcaib* comes from the noun *bolg* meaning bubble or blister.[415] I propose that this is the more likely translation.[416] Therefore, I would translate the above passage as: "The salmon chew the fruit, and the juice of the nuts burst forth in purple bubbles." This is closer to the later *Metrical Dindshenchas* translated by Gwynn as follows:

> "co nosethat na bratan.
> Do sug na cno, ni dail diss,
> dogniat na bolca immaiss"[417]

> "and the salmon eat them

[411] "Rennes", p.456.
[412] "Rennes", p.457.
[413] eDIL s.v. 1 bolg.
[414] This natural aspect of the salmon is something we have seen in the previous chapter, p.55.
[415] eDIL s.v. 2 bolg.
[416] The notion of a blister is also brought up in connection to the cooking of the salmon of knowledge in the story of the *Macgnímartha*. "Otter, salmon, and eel" p.128. However, the medieval story does not refer to a blister. "Boyish Exploits" p.186.
[417] Gwynn 1913, p.292 and 294.

From the juice of the nuts (no paltry matter)

are formed the mystic bubbles"[418]

the eDIL also renders *ina mbolcaib corcardaib* as "like crimson bubbles" even though they reference Stokes' edition.[419] Thus, in this passage the salmon does not necessarily consume the nuts of wisdom.

I would argue that the passage in the Dindshenchas does not imply that by eating the nuts of *imbas* this ability of knowledge and inspiration is transferred to the salmon, but that the salmon releases the *imbas* into the water.[420] This *imbas* is then also the knowledge that Sinann goes after. The text of *Sinann II* specifies that Sinann drowned not because the water rose against her for approaching the well but because she tries to go after the purple bubbles to find knowledge in the water. As such, the focus is on the bubbles of *imbas* that have been released into the water, not on the salmon that released this *imbas*. Moreover, the passage in *Tir Tairngiri* describes how the salmon sever the nuts from their husks. The husks are then sent floating down the river which makes a melodic sound.[421] As such the focus of this passage might be that the salmon play a role in activating the process or release of knowledge, but they do not become imbued with that knowledge themselves.

The role of folklore

One might wonder why Stokes translated the passage the way he did, why was he so convinced of the existence and importance of the salmon of knowledge in these tales? In one of Stokes' references, O'Donovan's translation of Cormac's Glossary, we do find an editorial note referencing the red spots appearing on the belly of the salmon of knowledge.[422] Unfortunately O'Donovan does not reference his source, and so it is difficult to say where this interpretation of the story came from. One possibility is that he might have used some contemporary folklore to interpret this medieval text. Even modern

[418] Gwynn 1913, p.293 and 295.
[419] eDIL s. v. 2. bolg. The colour of the nuts, spots, and bubbles is also a point of contention. In modern scholarship the colour appears as both red and purple. The eDIL in this case also translates "crimson" here and not "purple". The form this word corresponds to is *corcarda* for which the corresponding translations are given as "crimson" and "purple" (eDIL s. v. corcarda). As we shall see later in this chapter as well, modern folklore also often associates the colour red with the supposed spots on the bellies.
[420] See also the discussion on *imbas* starting on p.40 above.
[421] "Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise" p.213-214.
[422] O'Donovan 1868, p.35.

scholars, like Ó hÓgáin, point to motifs in modern folklore to find meaning in the medieval texts.[423] In some folklore accounts we find this idea of red spots appearing on the salmon of knowledge.[424] It is therefore possible that the interpretation of O'Donovan, and in turn Stokes, was based on folklore.

In this modern folklore the salmon of knowledge often appears in stories similar to the *Macgnímartha*.[425] In one story from modern folklore it is even mentioned that the salmon was the wisest of all fish.[426] Although, if we look at the material collected by the National Folklore Committee, that is not the only modern folklore version of the salmon of knowledge tale. Some versions involve Sinann and one involves Oisin, both of whom fail to eat the salmon of knowledge.[427] There is one interesting re-telling that combines all of the most popular elements of the salmon of knowledge tale, including a hazel tree and Boann failing to catch the salmon of knowledge chasing it into "Feg's pool" where Finn caught the salmon.[428] Interestingly, in the light of O'Donovan's interpretation of the nuts of *imbas*, some versions of the stories collected also refer to the idea of salmon eating fruits, gaining red spots on their bellies, and being called the salmon of knowledge. Some versions say that the berries of a rowan were the cause of these red spots.[429] This berry version seems to be more popular in folklore but connections between hazelnuts have also been recorded.[430] One thing at least becomes apparent from these modern folklore stories and that is, to paraphrase *Strange Animals in Our District*, that of all the stories about animals in Ireland the story of the salmon of knowledge is the most popular.[431] This modern popularity would seem in contrast to the medieval obscurity of the salmon of knowledge.

There are, however, some problems with equating the medieval sources with the modern folklore sources. Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that most Irish folklore was not written down until the mid-nineteenth century.[432] Moreover, the Irish Folklore Commission, which is the origin for most of the material in the Duchas archive, was not set-up until 1935, forty years after Stokes's

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[423] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.217.
[424] *One Old Story* The Schools' Collection, Volume 0096, Page 348.
[425] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.217.
[426] [no title] The Schools' Collection, Volume 0162, Page 107.
[427] *The Salmon of Knowledge* The Schools' Collection, Volume 0159, Page 135 and *My Home District* the Schools' Collection, Volume 0586, Page 275.
[428] *Old Irish Tales* The Schools' Collection, Volume 0713, Page 139.
[429] *One Old Story* The Schools' Collection, Volume 0096, Page 348.
[430] *Local Place Names* The Schools' Collection, Volume 1028, Page 221.
[431] *Strange Animals in Our District* The Schools' Collection, Volume 0783, Page 120.
[432] Markey 2006, p.25.

editions.[433] As such much of the material found in this folklore can in no way be used to point to any lost "original" versions of these tales. At the very least these folklore tales have undergone change since the medieval period, and it is very likely that modern notions (such as the Celtic Twilight) have played into the retellings of the tales.[434]

What I also believe is important in this context, is that there are only two types of stories that include a salmon of knowledge present in these folklore accounts on Duchas. These two types connect back to the most popular versions of these tales that have been translated, the *Macgnímartha* and the Dindshenchas.[435] The fact that there are no stories of the salmon of knowledge that are disconnected from these medieval tales I believe is significant.[436] Another indication that the salmon of knowledge may not be a very widely established theme is the fact that stories which include the salmon of knowledge alone constitute 23 total on Duchas. Stories which include the word salmon come to 764 total.[437] Granted, many of these stories include explanations of traditional occupations such as fishing. But even if we decide that a third of these entries are actual stories, tales about the salmon of knowledge are barely ten percent of that total.

Aside from the material in the Duchas archive, we can also observe the influence of earlier folklore collections on scholarly interpretations of the salmon of knowledge. If we look back at Jeremiah Curtin's *Myth and Folk-Lore of Ireland* from 1890 we see one possible version of a folktale which includes the salmon of knowledge also referenced by Nagy.[438] In this tale a young Finn is told by a giant to roast a salmon the giant had caught after chasing it for three days because it was the "most wonderful salmon in the world".[439] This salmon may be wonderful but it is not associated with knowledge. The cooking of the salmon does result in Finn gaining knowledge, but Finn gains that knowledge by burning

[433] The Duchas Archive is an online repository of the material in the National Folklore Collection of Ireland. The material from the National Folklore Commission is also accessible through this website. Duchas.ie.
[434] Markey 2006, p.39-40.
[435] When searching for the salmon of knowledge on the Duchas website the first couple of results are a version of the tale of Sinann and a version of the *Macgnímartha*. *My Home District* The Schools' Collection, Volume 0586, Page 275, and *The Salmon of Knowledge* The Schools' Collection, Volume 0159, Page 135.
[436] There may be one exception to this in a tale where Oisín is chasing the salmon of knowledge. (*Story of the Fianna The Schools' Collection, Volume 0116, Page 131*).
[437] This number was achieved by looking at the word search function on the Duchas website https://www.duchas.ie/en/src?q=salmon&t=CbesTranscript
[438] Nagy *Wisdom of the outlaw* 1985, p.290.
[439] Curtin 1975, p.140.

his thumb and chewing through the bone until he reaches the bone marrow. From the wording of this tale it would seem that Finn received wisdom from tasting the bone marrow in his own finger not from the salmon.[440] While Curtin, in his *Hero-Tales of Ireland,* does believe that this is an instance of the salmon of knowledge tales, I believe it is not.[441] The salmon in this story is never referred to as a salmon of knowledge, nor is it from the salmon that Finn receives his knowledge. Part of the medieval *Macgnímartha* does seem to have carried over in this tale, mainly the incident where Finn cooks a salmon and burns his finger. Yet, the idea of a salmon of knowledge has not.

Would the idea of a salmon of knowledge, or at least knowledge pertaining to the salmon, not have survived with the rest of the tale if the idea of a salmon of knowledge was firmly established in Irish folklore and culture? The idea of a thumb of knowledge has survived in this tale and is given a new explanation. It could be argued that other explanations pertaining to how Finn got his wisdom, such as from a well or a door, are also not described here, so it is not strange that a new explanation is given. I would agree. Following this argument, we could also say that the salmon of knowledge was never an established part of the Fenian tradition, it was merely one of many explanations of how Finn got his knowledge. Moreover, in Curtin's 1890's folklore collection salmon appear in the folktales as magical helpers and part of animal transformations, but not associated with wisdom or knowledge. Even if Finn was associated with salmon consistently in these tales, the salmon is not consistently associated with knowledge.

The stories of the salmon of knowledge do appear in Patrick Kennedy's *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*. He includes a version of Finn tasting the salmon of knowledge that is mostly the same as the medieval Irish version. It also contains a story about the origin of the Shannon which features salmon of knowledge. This tale is very close to the medieval tales except with one difference. The salmon gets its markings not from hazelnuts but from red rowan berries, very similar to later folklore accounts and to the interpretation by O'Donovan we saw above in this chapter.[442] However as Anne Markey has noted Kennedy did actually have access to and acknowledged his use of some medieval

[440] Curtin 1975, p.140.
[441] Curtin 1894, p.444.
[442] Kennedy 1891, p.251.

manuscripts.[443] Therefore, this early folklore, which influenced scholars such as Stokes, might itself have been based on medieval manuscripts. As such, the "folklore" meant to aid as a separate source in the interpretation of medieval texts, is itself an interpretation of a medieval text.

Eó fis

Moving back to medieval texts then, the only passage that directly describes a salmon which is to be eaten to gain knowledge, or even a salmon which carries knowledge, in the medieval corpus is in the *Macgnímartha*. This is in contrast to modern re-tellings of the stories of Finn where the salmon of knowledge is mentioned as a solid part of both the Finn legend and the origin of the Shannon and Boyne. *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit* is the only medieval reference to a salmon of knowledge where the term *eó fis* is ever used. The appearance of this term alone does complicate matters somewhat. The way in which *eó fis* is used here would imply that the audience was familiar with the concept of a salmon of knowledge. The salmon of knowledge is similarly referenced in the later manuscript of *Feis Tighe Conain*, namely, as a passing reference to something the audience would know well. Thus, the passage in *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit* alone keeps the idea alive that a salmon of knowledge would have been well-known in medieval Irish literature. If we assume that this line is evidence for the medieval concept of a salmon of knowledge, then this opens up a new theory; the salmon of knowledge existed and was well-known it was only very rarely clearly talked about.

Yet, it is still possible that this passage is not referring to an established motif. *Eó* could be used merely in a poetic play on words, as the word *eó* is similar to other words relating to knowledge such as *eolas*. Moreover, *eó* is not solely translatable as salmon. eDIL gives several possible translations of *eó*, but only one of them also carries the possibility of eating from it. That translation would be from *eó*, as it was used in middle Irish, for a "tree".[444] The word is used as such in the Dindshenchas of the trees Eó Ross and Eó Mugna.[445] The use of this word also occurs in a poem in the Book of Ballymote.[446] *Fis* is

[443] Markey 2006, p.32.
[444] eDIL s.v. 3 eó.
[445] Gwynn 1913, p.149. Interestingly the story of Eó Mugna is told by Finn, and Mugna is supposedly the name of his sister's son, a name which can also mean salmon. eDIL s.v. mugna.
[446] E. Hull 1932, p.382.

also used in the context of the tree of knowledge in the *Lebor Gabála*.[447] As such *eó fis* could here be the tree of knowledge giving us: "Unless I had eaten of the tree of knowledge".

Nonetheless, the term of *eó fis* also appears in the early modern text of *Cath Mhuighe Léana* and would seem to relate to salmon there.[448] Moreover, in the *Feis Tighe Conain* the term *eó fis* might very likely be a reference to the *Macgnímartha* origin of Finn's knowledge that is then rejected. Yet, these two manuscripts are both from a date after 1500 and are thus later than much of the rest of our corpus. As such, it would appear that the idea of the salmon of knowledge at least became more visibly present in later texts after the middle-ages. However, it is evidence such as that from *Cath Mhuighe Léana* that we should use with caution.

In *Cath Mhuighe Léana* the term *eó fis* is used as an epithet for Fintan.[449] He is called the salmon of knowledge, in a similar way that Patrick is called the salmon of heaven and Finn is called golden salmon in the *Acallam*.[450] If we allow for the fact that salmon may be an epithet given to wise men this could connect our "well" stories with those of the "old salmon". However, it is important to keep in mind that *Cath Mhuighe Léana* is an early modern Irish text and the edition by O'Curry, in which this term appears, is based on a seventeenth century manuscript. [451] Therefore, this text is not evidence for medieval uses of the term. The same applies to the early modern Irish *The Adventures of Leithin*.[452] Even if references to the story appear in medieval texts, such as the *Hawk of Achill*, we do not have a medieval incarnation of this story.[453] While these stories connect in interesting ways to the medieval sources, they are not medieval sources themselves. As such, they can only provide us with limited information. This is important to keep in mind because it means that Fintan is never explicitly connected with the salmon of knowledge in medieval texts.

Yet, it is not uncommon to find statements that Fintan is the salmon of knowledge, literally the same salmon of knowledge that we find in the *Macgnímartha*. Peter Berresford Ellis, for examples states

[447] Macalister vol 1 (1938), p.56.
[448] O'Curry 1855, p.97.
[449] O'Curry 1855, p.97
[450] Dooley and Roe 1999, p.5.
[451] O'Curry 1855, p.xv.
[452] Hyde 1914-1916, p.116.
[453] Hyde 1914-1916, p.117.

that Fintan in his salmon shape: "ate of the Nuts of Knowledge before swimming to a pool in the river Boyne."[454] Yet, the idea that the old salmon, or a wise man transforming into a salmon, is a literal incarnation of the salmon of knowledge seems to me like a rather inconsistent theory. One element that is often brought up in light of this theory is that the salmon of knowledge is supposedly one-eyed.[455] Yet, the several salmon that appear in the context of the "well" stories are not said to be one-eyed. It is only ever said that Fintan, as an incarnation of the salmon of knowledge, is one-eyed. [456] Tuan also has both of his eyes, and would then be a separate salmon of knowledge from Fintan. Thus, either there is a singular salmon of knowledge who is one-eyed, or representations of the salmon of knowledge are plentiful and Fintan is but one incarnation of that motif. To me, if anything, the existence of several incarnations of the salmon of knowledge seems most likely. Even if we consider that all the stories in our corpus represent the salmon of knowledge, it becomes clear that there is no such thing as *the* salmon of knowledge.

Established concept

We keep facing the same problem: there is some evidence for a salmon being associated with wisdom, but it is highly inconsistent at best. Any connection between these tales can be argued for, but no connection can clearly be shown to exist. Moreover, the evidence for a salmon of knowledge is not proportionate to the number of scholars who address the idea of the salmon of knowledge to interpret the appearance of salmon in Irish texts. This can lead to a selective use of evidence. For example, why is it generally accepted that Finn received his knowledge by consuming a salmon of knowledge and not by drinking from a well of knowledge? The latter explanation is equally, if not more, frequent than that of the salmon.[457] Certainly this is the case in our corpus, a corpus that is focussed on the salmon of knowledge. In the particular case of Finn Mac Cumhaill, I believe the idea of the salmon as Finn's knowledge provider has at least in some ways been popularised by successful literary translations of the turn of the twentieth century such as those by lady Augusta Gregory.[458] Even so, scholars had circulated

[454] Berresford Ellis 1987, p.124.
[455] *Wisdom of the Outlaw* 1985, p.137.
[456] Runge 2020, XXI.
[457] It occurs in the two explanations in *Feis Tighe Conain*.
[458] Mackillop 1985, p.113.

the idea of the salmon of knowledge before the first popular translations of the medieval texts.[459] The early translations of the medieval texts might explain why the salmon of knowledge as a concept is accepted into the popular mind, but it does not explain why scholars so readily accept it.

In the *Transactions from the Ossianic Society* vol 2 (1854), Thomas O'Kearney provides a translation of *Feis Tighe Conain*. In it he comes across the term *Fios an Bradain*, or a "salmon of knowledge", which he attempts to explain in his notes: "The editor has met with no account of this salmon of knowledge in Irish manuscripts, though there may be such an account extant".[460] This is quite an unexpected statement for us modern scholars. Though, perhaps, it is a more accurate statement than the explanations of the salmon of knowledge we are used to. O'Kearney's remark shows that the concept of the salmon of knowledge was not always a firmly established notion. Yet, this concept would appear strongly established only forty years later in Stokes' editions.

The space of this thesis does not allow me to go in depth into the exact and full development of the social context and academic scholarship surrounding the issue of how the salmon of knowledge became such an important icon. However, as I have argued here, the evidence for an established concept of the salmon of knowledge in medieval Irish literature is rather thin. Furthermore, some of the more convincing pieces of evidence, such as *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit,* are not at the forefront of many discussions. However, as we have seen above, even that evidence, which seems like a strong advocate for the concept of a salmon of knowledge, may not be entirely conclusive.[461]

Moreover, if scholars only focus on the possible explanations of the salmon in contexts with wisdom, this can create a slanted view of the evidence. If the salmon of knowledge is a widely known concept, then every salmon can be associated with knowledge. Scholars like Stokes might then ignore certain absences or assume certain "omissions" actually do belong with the tales. This makes the concept of the salmon of knowledge appear more established then is actually the case. Moreover, it creates the situation where the concept is not well established in medieval Irish literature, but it is a well-established concept in scholarly literature. Many of the aspects of the tales that are supposedly evidence for a

[459] Lady Gregory's *Gods and Fighting Men* was not published until 1905 more ten years after Stokes' editions of the Rennes and Bodleian *Dindshenchas*.
[460] O'Kearney 1855, p.174.
[461] P.72 above.

connection with knowledge, such as Finn and Fintan both being given salmon as an epithet, may also reflect other associations between salmon as we have seen in the previous chapter. These other connotations and connections might also be further discussed if we look at the influences present in these Irish stories.

6. Christianity and Other Influences

Thus far we have established that there is comparatively little evidence for a salmon of knowledge in medieval Irish literature and that the salmon is also associated with many other things. We might at this point follow along with other scholars and consider what influences outside of Ireland may have influenced the concept of the salmon of knowledge.[462] In this thesis I have already referenced Welsh and Scottish tales in our discussion of this presumably Irish motif.[463] Scholars have also made many other cultural connections, one of the most frequent ones being Scandinavian culture. [464] In this chapter I will look mainly at three different types of influences that are often discussed. These influences can be roughly, though with some overlap, divided along the lines of our three categories of tales. The first influence is that of the folklore connections and international motifs, such as "the oldest animal", present in the tales about "the old salmon". We will also find some of those folklore influences in "the well" story with "The White Serpent's Flesh". Mythological influences surrounding the "well" story have also been discussed by scholars, particularly Scandinavian mythology. Thirdly, the "miscellaneous" tales all have a strong connection to Christian influences. I believe Christianity might have been an important influence on the idea of the salmon of knowledge that has thus far not been explored enough by scholars. Rather, scholars focus on pagan connections in mythology and folklore.[465] This chapter will first address these folkloric influences.

Folklore

One folkloric tale-type that is often applied to the tales of Finn is "The White Serpent's Flesh". An example of this comparison can be found in Robert Scott's *The Thumb of Knowledge; In Legends of Finn, Sigurd, and Taliesin.*[466] The motif from the Aarne-Thompson index is described as follows by Thompson: "Contrary to warning, the cook eats the flesh of the white serpent. He learns the speech of

[462] We will come across others in the chapter below, but Joseph Nagy is an example of this.
[463] P.54 above, for example.
[464] Examples of scholars who use Folklore comparisons include Szövérffy 1960 and Nagy.
[465] See Ross 1968, p.350-351, for example,
[466] Scott 1930. See also Kuusela 2022 p.158.

animals".[467] In this index no Irish material was included, but in a in complementary catalogue called *The Types of Irish folktales* the *Macgnímartha* was included as a by-form of this tale-type.[468]

While the exact appearance of a tale may vary, "The White Serpent's Flesh" seems not entirely applicable to the story of how Finn got his knowledge. Ó hÓgáin believes that the story type, as a standard form, does not appear in Ireland at all.[469] The story of Finn, he believes, is a "much altered ecotype".[470] Moreover, the type of knowledge that Finn receives is different to that of the motif. He does not gain knowledge of the language of animals but of poetic (human) knowledge. If the type of knowledge were the only thing that differed perhaps that would not be of much significance. However, the vessel of knowledge is also nothing like a snake, it is a salmon. Because snakes do not exist in Ireland one can argue that a different animal had to be substituted for a snake. However, an eel would be a likelier substitute for snakes in Ireland.[471] Therefore, I believe that the snake in "The White Serpent's Flesh" is only vaguely connected to the salmon of the *Macgnímartha*. On the other hand, the first element of "The White Serpent's Flesh" does appear to correspond to the *Macgnímartha*. Finn does cook the salmon under the instructions not to eat from it and eventually consumes the entire animal.[472] However, there is an entire second section to that tale-type that involves overhearing animals speak and thus saving people.[473] None of this second part is in any way applicable to the *Macgnímartha* or other Medieval Finn stories. Therefore, while "The White Serpent's Flesh" is often associated with the *Macgnímartha* it does not appear to be entirely applicable.

Another motif that appears in Cross' index is that of the "oldest animal".[474] This was later also adopted by Thompson in the second edition of his *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*.[475] We have previously discussed this motif in chapter 2. Hull was convinced of the existence of this motif in Irish literature.[476] She presents a couple of poems that follow a pattern of increasingly old animals and objects. The salmon

[467] Aarne and Thompson 1964, p.236.
[468] Ó Súilleabháin and Christiansen 1963, p.138.
[469] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.425.
[470] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.425.
[471] Mac Coitir 2015, p.218.
[472] "Boyish Exploits", p.186.
[473] Aarne and Thompson 1964, p.236.
[474] Cross 1952, p.59.
[475] Thompson 1955 p.380.
[476] E. Hull 1932, p.379.

usually inhabits a spot right at the end of these lists.[477] Hull beliefs that the formula of the oldest animal is quite common in stories, and she reiterates that the salmon is usually one of the oldest animals in Ireland.[478] Moreover, she agrees that wisdom is often connected to the salmon as the oldest animal. This motif seems to form much of the basis for why the tales of the "old salmon" are regarded as examples of the salmon of knowledge.[479] In the end however she is more focused on the birds of the story than the salmon.[480] This focus on birds as the oldest animal might also be reflected in the extant texts.

The oldest bird is something present in the Cross' index.[481] Sionead Davies has also stated that, in one Welsh triad, the three oldest animals seem to all three be birds.[482] O'Rahilly also addresses this idea of the oldest animal in the tale of *Cullwch ac Olwen*. He believes the eagle the be the oldest animal but not as knowledgeable as the magical salmon.[483] I believe he is alone in his take on this story. In fairness to his argument the text does deviate from the formula a little in the fact that the salmon is not specifically stated as the oldest animal in the world, the eagle is, but the salmon is visited last.[484] Still, I am not entirely convinced that the salmon in *Cullwch ac Olwen* exists outside of the motif of the oldest animal. What it does show is that the salmon is at least not consistently the oldest animal in these stories. Thus, the importance of the salmon in the motif of the oldest animal is also in question.

Mythology

Similar to these folkloric connections, mythological connections are used to search for parallels in tales from different cultures. While the Dindshenchas is not mythology, it fits more within the Isodorian modal of etymological literature, these stories are still often used in mythological discussions.[485] The Dindshenchas stories that concern us feature characters considered to be the gods of Irish tradition.[486] One example of this is Boand and her relationships with the Dagda and Óengus as is

[477] E. Hull 1932, p.382.
[478] E. Hull 1932, p.379.
[479] Green 1993, p.190-191.
[480] E. Hull 1932, p.386.
[481] Cross 1952, 44.
[482] Davies 2007, p.620.
[483] O'Rahilly 1971, p.319.
[484] Davies 2007, p.287.
[485] Schlüter 2017, p.23.
[486] Schlüter 2017, p.24.

presented in the Dindshenchas.[487] As such the well in these stories is sometimes discussed in the context of a mythological holy well. MacLeod sees the stories of Boand and Sinann in particular as taking place around rivers of sacred knowledge.[488] MacLeod suggests pan-European connections for some of the elements contained in these tales.[489]

A more direct comparison between Irish and other mythological traditions is explored by Patrick Ford in "*The Well of Nechtan; and La Gloire Lumineuse*". This particular comparison focusses on the connections between the well of the Irish Nechtan from the story of Boand and that of the Indo-Iranian tradition of Napat. To Ford, the pagan elements of wisdom and poetry are the most important connecting factor.[490] This idea, also addressed by MacLeod, involves the notion of fire in the water, which Ford connects with the elements of illumination often found in the language to describe wisdom.[491] The *imbas forosnai*, translated as "illuminating knowledge", from the Fenian tradition would be an example of that.[492] Ford believes the bursting of the water and damage the well can do in the story of Boand is connected to a bright ray of light of some sort.[493] These ideas of enlightenment then bring the idea of wisdom to the well of Nechtan, otherwise not stated in the text. The salmon may only be a possible Irish element of these wells, as it is not reflected in the other traditions mentioned by Ford or Macleod.

Another European mythological source that is often used in comparisons is that of Scandinavian tradition. Loki specifically, is sometimes said to connect to the Irish salmon of knowledge as the trickster god himself has transformed into a salmon on occasion. Nagy in his "Otter, Salmon, and Eel in Gaelic Narrative*"* brings up this association with salmon.[494] To Nagy, Loki, as a trickster, is associated with a form of impulsive intelligence.[495] Though, whether this type of trickster knowledge is parallel to the type of Irish poetic knowledge, which we have previously identified in connection to truths, might be in question. Loki, according to Nagy, is the prototypical salmon of Norse myth because Loki transformed

[487] Williams 2016, p.28.
[488] MacLeod 2006, p.337.
[489] MacLeod 2006, p.340-341.
[490] Ford 1974, p.67.
[491] Ford 1974, p.67-68. For further reference on the word use see Table 2 in the Appendix.
[492] Ford 1974, p.70.
[493] Ford 1974, p.69.
[494] "Otter, Salmon and Eel", p.138-139.
[495] "Otter, Salmon and Eel", p.138.

into presumably the ancestor of all salmon and is also the inventor of the net.[496] Moreover, in other stories surrounding Loki, the god at one point steals riches from a fish that has lived a lifetime before being a fish, which Nagy connects to Fintan.[497] Loki's transformation into a salmon might be regarded as parallel to some Irish stories of the "old salmon". Although, it must also be said that the context within which the "old salmon" exists in Irish literature is entirely different from the Scandinavian story. Moreover, while Loki's transformation into a salmon may parallel some themes of escape from Irish literature, Loki is caught in his salmon shape after only one transformation. Therefore, I think the parallels between the salmonid Loki and the Irish salmon stories are questionable.

Leaving Loki aside for the moment, the concept of a thumb of knowledge is also associated with folklore of Norse tradition.[498] Nagy tells us that Sigurd is a hero from Norse tradition who like Finn burns his finger on an animal he is cooking and gains some form of knowledge.[499] Sigurd burns his finger on a dragon's heart and learns the language of birds. Both figures are used as examples of the folkloric motif of "The White Serpent's Flesh". However, the story of Sigurd specifically specifies him gaining knowledge of bird language, something that Finn does not get. Regardless, it is not a salmon that provides the strongest connection between these two stories, it is the sucking of a thumb.

In one part of the Sigurd tale the god Loki kills an otter.[500] Loki's subsequent payment for killing the otter might involve the idea of the fire in the water and wisdom explored by Ford. In penance for killing the otter Loki has to acquire a treasure from an old fish underneath a waterfall.[501] Nagy argues that the wealth of the old fish does not simply represent material wealth but is a symbolic type of wealth connected to the fire in the water and the bright supernatural symbol of power and wisdom that is usually contained in water.[502] This idea, of a bright and shining salmon as a treasure, may to some extend also be reflected in the stories of the salmon of paradise in *Momera* and *Coir Anmann* where the salmon provides a shining cloak.[503] However, according to Nagy, it is not the fish that is necessarily

[496] "Otter, Salmon and Eel", p.139.
[497] "Otter, Salmon and Eel", p.139.
[498] Other examples include Ford 1974, p.72 and the argument of the book *The Thumb of Knowledge* by Scott 1930.
[499] Nagy "Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd" 1980, p.123.
[500] Nagy "Intervention and Disruption" 1980, p.127.
[501] "Intervention and Disruption" 1980, p.128.
[502] "Intervention and Disruption", p.139.
[503] O'Curry 1855, p.163 and "Coir Anmann" p.303.

representative of wisdom in the Sigurd tale, it is the shining treasure. Because salmonid Loki acquired this treasure representative of wisdom he is now supposedly acting as the salmon of knowledge in Irish tradition.[504] However, it must be noted that the old fish in this tale is not necessarily a salmon, it is a pike. Therefore, a salmon may not be connected with these supposed literal and figurative treasures of knowledge.

The salmon is also sometimes connected with gods of knowledge, in Irish and in Scandinavian mythology. In his discussion on the singular god of the otherworld O'Rahilly makes the direct assumption that, because Odin is the god of wisdom and the otherworld god, any otherworld god in Irish tradition is the same god of wisdom as Odin.[505] The salmon of knowledge, as one of the shapes of the otherworldly god, swims in otherworldly springs and is represented by Fintan and the god Dagda. As part of the connection between the Dagda and Odin, O'Rahilly brings up the fact that the salmon of knowledge, like Odin, is also one-eyed.[506] This is based on the assumption that the salmon of knowledge is also one-eyed but, as we have seen in the discussion on page 73 above, this only applies to Fintan. MacLeod also brings up some interesting connections with the Dagda. According to her the Dagda is connected to Ess Ruaid and the pool of Linn Fec.[507] Ess Ruaid is a location connected to the salmon of knowledge as a place where Fintan was in the shape of a salmon.[508] Ó hÓgáin even claims that an alternate name for the Dagda, Ruadh Ró-fheasa, had an association with "Find", an original incarnation of both Finn and Fintan.[509] We are also reminded of the fact that Boand is involved in a relationship with the Dagda.[510] These connections are very interesting, but none of them are based on a connection with a salmon, let alone a salmon of knowledge.

These connections are based on names and locations that connect to water, but not salmon. Fintan is only ever identified as "the" salmon of knowledge in an early modern, not a medieval text. Moreover, the places of Linn Fec and Ess Ruaid could have had a pre-existing connection with

[504] "Intervention and Disruption", p.140.
[505] O'Rahilly 1971, p.318.
[506] O'Rahilly 1971, p.320.
[507] MacLeod 2006, p. 350.
[508] Runge 2020, xxi.
[509] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p. 377.
[510] Gwynn 1913, p.31-33.

knowledge that did not need to be based on a connection with salmon. The Dagda certainly seems to have qualities of wisdom without necessarily having a strong connection to salmon.[511] Thus, this link between the Dagda and the salmon of knowledge is rather fragile. Moreover, the notion that the salmon of knowledge is related to Odin, based on the salmon of knowledge's one-eyedness and supposed connections with the Dagda, is even more precarious.

That Irish and Scandinavian stories have similarities and parallels is thus something argued by several scholars, but not all scholars agree on how or why these stories are related. Nagy, for example, suggests that these stories may be related in the grand scale of Indo-European tales, myth, and folkloric elements.[512] Scott presents the possibility that all these European tales originate with one common ancestor.[513] Alternatively, the connection between these tales comes from the historical interaction between Irish and Scandinavian cultures.[514] The simplest explanation for the connection between certain tales would sit in the historical interaction between medieval Irish and Scandinavian cultures.[515] I believe the latter is often seen as a strong element for the comparison of the tales between these two cultures.[516] Even if we consider these Scandinavian stories to be connected to Irish stories that does not necessarily mean that this is on the ground of a shared Indo-European mythology.

Christianity

In *Ireland's Immortals*, Mark Williams has shown that some figures that appear mythological to us, even in language, might in fact be part of a Christian tradition of symbology.[517] According to Williams: "it is abundantly clear that a secular literary tradition in Irish could only have emerged in a Christian context, and that the Bible remained at all times the wellspring and core of Irish literacy".[518] One of the examples used by him to prove that possible pre-Christian gods may be co-opted into a

[511] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p. 145-146.
[512] "Otter, Salmon and Eel", p.140.
[513] Scott 1930, p.88-89.
[514] Scott 1930, p.232.
[515] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.217.
[516] Woolf 2017, p.127.
[517] Williams 2016, p.54. Szövérffy also addresses the fact that medieval religious literature, in his case hagiography, is closely connected to secular literature. Szövérffy 1960, p.243.
[518] Williams 2016, p.14.

Christian context is the depiction of Mannan Mac Lir.[519] This same Mannan mac Lir also appears as the figure who speaks to Cormac in the symbolic passage explaining the well of knowledge Cormac encountered on his trip to the land of the promise.[520] Importantly, the land of the promise is also a phrase often used to convey paradise.[521] This further strengthens the possibility that many perceived pagan elements in our corpus, such as the salmon, may in fact represent Christian symbology.

This idea is also repeated by Jeffrey Turco regarding Scandinavian literature. He discusses the figure of Loki in particular, as he appears in these texts whilst transforming into different animals.[522] Turco suggests that the passage where Loki transforms into a salmon and is caught by "a net of his own making" is using a shorthand for Christian tradition.[523] In fact, if we follow Turco's argument that the fish and fishing imagery in the story of Loki being caught as a salmon comes from biblical imagery, that would completely negate the argument for a common Indo-European mythological connection between Scandinavian and Irish stories. Nevertheless, it remains possible to find some common inspiration, but we must do that by looking at the Christian tradition.

In our "miscellaneous texts" we also find biblical imagery. In the two instances of the multi-coloured salmon we see that this salmon is said to originate from the rivers of paradise.[524] We find this same imagery in the Dindshenchas of Boand where some rivers from biblical locations are mentioned.[525] The shining, possibly multi-coloured, cloaks made from these salmon might be suggestive of the cloak of many colours worn by the biblical Joseph of the old testament.[526] If this is connected at all it may only be reminiscent of a simple reference or "easter egg" as the rest of the tale is quite different. These are not exact parallels, rather they are more ideas and themes that correspond to each other.[527] But even the metaphor of shining knowledge, and in connection, *imbas forosnai* (illuminating knowledge), may be linked to Christianity.[528]

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[519] Williams 2016, p.63.
[520] "Cormac's Adventure", p.216.
[521] Singer 2001, p.36. Dooley and Roe, 1999, p.239.
[522] Turco 2016, p.201.
[523] Turco 2016, p.201.
[524] "Coir Anmann", p.303.
[525] Gwynn 1913, p.29.
[526] Genesis 37:3.
[527] Turco 2016, p.231.
[528] Williams 2016, p.61.

Another tale from *Cóir Anmann*, which we have previously discussed above, contains much more significant biblical imagery.[529] In this tale a barren queen named Mugain, with the help of two clerics, gives birth to a lamb and salmon before giving birth to a son. The number three may already be observed here, but aside from being a number of importance in Christian religion it is also a number that is often used in folktales in general.[530] The two animals the queen births are more important. These are symbolic and meant to cleanse her womb.[531] A lamb is a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ (i.e. the lamb of God) with whom it is even directly compared in the text.[532] The second animal is a salmon, of which reliquaries are made. This fish could also be seen as a symbol for Jesus Christ.

In the Roman world the fish became an important Christian symbol representing Jesus Christ.[533] The symbol might have an earlier origin and even be associated with prophets in Jewish tradition.[534] While this symbol was prevalent in the classical period, in the middle ages the iconography of the fish as a personification of Jesus waned, other imagery such as sheep took precedence.[535] Moreover, we cannot prove that the Irish were aware of the classical Christian fish symbology, only that they had some knowledge of the tales from the classical period.[536] Likewise, there is nothing to suggest that salmon would be singularly important in the Irish Christian tradition except for the fact that the salmon was an important fish in Irish society (either through economical or environmental reasons).

However, Moyle and Moyle have argued that the fish remained associated with Christ in medieval art.[537] There is medieval Christian imagery that is also associated with fish. In medieval times the notion of the apostles as the fisherman of souls persisted.[538] There is even some evidence to suggest that in medieval Ireland fish were still associated with Christ. The eDIL even makes a note of it in the use of the word *éicne*.[539] As we have seen in chapter 4, Suzanne Lewis discusses the imagery within the

[529] See p.35 above.
[530] See also Jovanovic and Levy "A look at the rule of three." 1997.
[531] "Coir Anmann", p.345.
[532] "Coir Anmann", p.345.
[533] Edmondson 2010, p.57.
[534] Stroumsa 1992, p.204.
[535] Edmondson 2010, p.58-59. While In the Christian world medieval symbology shifted Stroumsa has argued that in medieval Islam there were still some associations made with fish and the Prophets. Stroumsa 1992, 205.
[536] Williams 2016, p.48.
[537] Moyle and Moyle 1991, p.8-9.
[538] Turco 2016, p, 212 and Edmondson 2010, p.58.
[539] eDIL s.v. éicne.

Book of Kells and the use of a fish symbol that she identifies as possibly a salmon.[540] This fish also appears as the abbreviation for several divine names.[541] On its own this fish may represent reincarnation or it may be a reference to "Feeding the Multitude".[542] "Feeding the Multitude" is one of the well-known miracles of Christ where he shares bread and fish among thousands of people.[543] In this instance the fish might also be seen as symbolic for the body of Christ itself, very specifically the eucharist.[544] Perhaps the symbology of salmon was aided by the fact that fish, and thus salmon, were a popular lent food.[545] While the Book of Kells is only one example, I believe it does show that the salmon was involved in some form of biblical imagery. Even the nuts of knowledge could possibly be connected with the actual biblical fruits of knowledge on the apple tree. Although, none of this Christian imagery and symbology is directly related to knowledge. Nonetheless, I believe it is important that we address the idea of a Christian influence because the idea that the salmon of knowledge was a pagan element is so prevalent.[546] Recognizing possible Christian influences might allow us to have a more balanced discussion on the salmon of knowledge that is not solely focused on its pagan aspects.

Conclusion

If we only imagine the salmon as a sacred pagan element in stories, we will not be able to fully understand how the salmon, and even the concept of the salmon of knowledge, functioned in Irish literature. As such, I agree with both Mark Williams and Jeffrey Turco that we must consider the Christian element of these texts when we discuss them. These Christian influences may have been more relevant for the interpretation of the medieval concept of the salmon of knowledge then any pagan influences.

Moreover, because I am not convinced of the firmly established nature of the salmon of knowledge in Irish culture, I find it hard to agree with comparative studies that compare the Irish salmon

[540] Lewis 1980, p.144. There is a PHD Thesis written by Michael C. Johnson called *The Serpent, The Salmon, and The Tête Coupée: Pagan Celtic Religious Iconography in the Book of Kells* that also discusses this that I could not get hold of. Though it seems to interpret the salmon as pagan imagery.
[541] Lewis 1980, p.145.
[542] Lewis 1980, p.145.
[543] Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:12-17, and John 6:1-14.
[544] Lewis 1980, p.145.
[545] Hoffman 2005, p.337.
[546] See Scott 1930, p 92 and O'Rahilly 1971, p.319.

to other mythological beings such as Loki. In the case of Loki, we have seen that those comparisons are based on elements that in and of themselves might be Christian. Moreover, the elements that are supposed to connect these mythologies together are rarely dependent on the salmon as a connective element.

In that sense, viewing these stories in the light of folklore motifs might seem easier as these types of motifs appear and reappear across the world without necessarily having a connection. Yet, the motifs often connected to the salmon of knowledge are, in my opinion, not entirely fitting. The often-cited tale-type of "The White Serpent's Flesh" to me seems, again, only very loosely connected. That is not to say that I do not believe cultural connections from Scandinavian folklore or mythology might have made its way to Ireland. However, none of it is clearly connected, nor can it provide a sloid basis of prove for the existence of the salmon of knowledge in Irish literature.

7. What About Hazelnuts? Other things associated with wisdom.

As we have now seen a salmon does not necessarily have to represent or carry knowledge when it appears in literature. This chapter aims to show that a salmon is also by no means the only thing connected with knowledge in Irish literature. We have already encountered two other things that are often associated with knowledge as they are frequently mentioned alongside the salmon of knowledge: hazelnuts and water. That water is connected to salmon may not be a surprise as the salmon is an aquatic animal. Even the association between water and knowledge appears to be quite common because, as we shall see below, that link can be found in many different literary traditions from around the world. Hazelnuts, on the other hand, might seem like a more unique element to associate with knowledge. Yet, it also has some precedent in other European stories. Moreover, in Irish literature there are also other animals that are in some ways associated with wisdom or knowledge. We will start this overlook with the one element that is impossible to separate from the salmon, water.

Water

Water as a source of knowledge is common in other literature from around the world. This connection between water, knowledge, and even poetry, is sometimes pointed to as a similarity between Celtic and Hindu religion.[547] Ford makes a similar comparison based on this notion regarding holy wells.[548] There also exists such a well of knowledge among Scandinavian mythology, namely *mímisbrunnr*, who's waters can grand wisdom.[549] Moreover, *Mímisbrunnr* also appears at the root of a tree, the world-tree to be more specific.[550] According to Heinz, there is also a fountain of wisdom in the Bible.[551] Though in the biblical context it is far more allegorical.[552] It thus becomes apparent that water as a source of knowledge is a common notion around the world.

If we suppose that the Irish stories in the Dindshenchas are connected to other Indo-European myths, similar to what scholars such as MacLeod do, this might underscore the importance of water as

[547] Wagner 1975, p.1.
[548] Ford 1974, p.67.
[549] Rusu 2008, p.89.
[550] Rusu 2008, p.86.
[551] Heinz 1999, p.267.
[552] de Vos 2007, p.177-178.

a symbol of wisdom.[553] Carey gives an example from an early Indo-Iranian language whereby a young man tries to retrieve a light from a body of water, Carey supposes this story might have a connection with the story of Sinann.[554] Though, like the salmon, there are also plenty of instances where the description of a pool, river, or other body of water is simply a description of a backdrop and does not carry any further significance. Moreover, the existence of a well of knowledge in other literature is of course not prove that this is also the case in Irish literature. Yet, there is some evidence for this fact in Irish literature itself.

We find one example of this association between water and knowledge, outside of a context with salmon, in the *Colloquy of the Two Sages*. There a passage reads:

> "ar bá baile fallsigthe éicsi dog*r*és lasna filedu f*or* brú us*c*i"[555]

> "for the poets deemed that on the brink of water it was always a place of revelation of science".[556]

Beck also suggests that the Irish often linked their rivers to deities.[557] This connection with water, according to Beck, also connects these deities to wisdom.[558] Water is also the source of Finn's wisdom in some texts of our corpus, several instances of knowledge granting water appear in *Feis Tighe Conain*.[559] A well of wisdom is also explicitly identified in *Tir Tairngiri*.[560] In the textual material there is even evidence that water is a source of wisdom and *imbas* without any further association with

[553] MacLeod 2006, p.349.
[554] Carey "Irish Parallels to the Myth of Odin's Eye" 1983, p.215.
[555] Stokes "The Colloquy of the two Sages" 1870, p.8.
[556] "The Colloquy of the two Sages" 1870, p.9.
[557] Beck 2015, p.280.
[558] Beck 2015, p.295.
[559] Ford 1974 p.70.
[560] "Cormac's Adventure", p.216.

hazelnuts or salmon.[561] Therefore, regardless of the presence of salmon, it appears water is connected with wisdom in Irish literature.[562]

The relationship between aquatic wisdom and the salmon is something that is difficult to entirely separate, because a salmon is a fish it is reliant on water to exist. Still, Carey suggests that it is the water of knowledge that is eventually associated with salmon and hazelnuts.[563] Thus, water on its own is associated with knowledge, regardless of the appearances of salmon or hazel trees which are discussed next.

Hazelnuts

Hazel trees do have their own particular association with water. Hazels often grow near water and have a strong connection with wells.[564] Finn might even have further association with hazels as he is sometimes known to carry a shield of hazelwood and in some stories has a bard who is named Cnú Dheireóil, "Little nut".[565] In our corpus these nuts are found near water in the Dindshenchas of Sinann and in *Tir Tairngiri*. These hazelnuts are often referred to as the nuts of *imbas*.[566] According to Mac Coitir the hazel tree in Celtic stories also seems to have some symbolic connections with kingship.[567] In these connections hazelnuts and the salmon do seem to appear in similar contexts. Unlike salmon however, hazel trees, and particularly their nuts, can exist in a context entirely separated from water. We previously discussed *Rath Cnámrossa* where there is a reference to some nuts of love that were brought to Finn from the Segais.[568] Finn recognises that these nuts are not of "good knowledge" rather of "doubt and uneasiness".[569]

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[561] Knott 1936 p.6, the word *imbas* appears in reference to the river Boyne and possibly the river Bush in the sentence: "imbas for Búais & Boind i medón in mís mithemon cacha blíadna" from the *Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*. Possibly meaning something like: "there was great knowledge on the Bush and Boyne every year in the middle of the month of June". Incidentally, stokes actually seems to translate this *imbas* as "fish", Stokes 1902 P.28. I must agree with him that fish is an interesting translation for this context considering the fact that salmon come back to spawn in rivers in the summer. The one problem is that *imbas* is nowhere else used as fish.
[562] MacLeod also devotes a whole article on how in Irish literature water is associated with wisdom. MacLeod 2006, p.337.
[563] Carey "the Myth of Odin's Eye" 1983, p.217.
[564]Mac Coitir 2018, p.73.
[565] Mac Coitir 2018, p.77-78.
[566] "The colloquy of the two sages" 1870, p.456.
[567] Mac Coitir 2018, p.79.
[568] P.29 above.
[569] Gwynn 1913, p.131.

In their connection with water, hazels are apparently also connected with snakes in Germanic tradition.[570] In these tales a *haselwurm* imparts knowledge on those that consume it.[571] Scott considers this tale to be an incarnation of the "White Serpent's Flesh".[572] On the surface this connection is interesting, it would make the knowledge of the hazel more consistent than that of the salmon. It would also benefit the argument that we are seeing an international motif that usually includes snakes but that in Irish literature, in the absence of snakes, a salmon is substituted. Regardless, this apparently greater association between hazels and knowledge would further imply that the knowledge apparently contained within the salmon originates from the hazel.

This *haselwurm* might possibly connect the hazel tree with the biblical tree of knowledge whereat the devil appeared in the form of a snake. Leander Petzoldt suggests that the *haselwurm* was regarded as the snake that tempted Adam and Eve.[573] In paradise, this snake would hide underneath the hazel tree.[574] The *haselwurm* would then not be an entirely accurate parallel to the Irish salmon of knowledge. The salmon of knowledge is generally regarded with positive qualities while the *haselwurm* is in fact the worst snake in human history.

Still, if the idea of a hazel tree in paradise is also present in Irish texts it would leave the door open to assume that the hazel tree was regarded as, at least similar, to the tree of knowledge in paradise. Perhaps, the Irish imagined several types of trees in paradise with several attributes. There was one other tree in paradise that figured in the Irish imagination, the "tree of life".[575] A possible hazel in paradise might have been regarded as a tree of poetry. That believe would, however, not stem from wider Christian tradition but would be entirely Irish. Scott does believe that there may have been a pre-Christian tree-cult.[576] According to Scott, the Fianna had a famous apple tree.[577] Still, this supposed tree-cult does not entirely explain why the Irish would have imagined hazelnuts to be specifically associated with poetry, instead of apples for example. It also does not entirely explain why these hazel trees of

[570] Mac Coitir 2018, p.74.
[571] Scott 1930, p.91 and 176.
[572] Scott 1930, p.91 and 176. We have also discussed this motif above in chapter 6.
[573] Petzoldt 2003, p.89-90.
[574] Petzoldt 2003, p.90.
[575] Williams 2016, p.52.
[576] Scott 1930, p.92.
[577] Scott 1930, p.22.

knowledge have positive connotations and the tree of knowledge in paradise causes humans to be banished from paradise. Therefore, I do believe it is likely that in Ireland some belief could have existed outside of Christian myth that connected the hazel and its nuts with knowledge. Perhaps this originally Irish myth was further propelled forward by the existence of a tree of knowledge in the bible, or perhaps these were seen as two entirely separate occurrences. Nonetheless, I do believe it is an interesting parallel to keep in might when we are discussing how knowledge functioned in the Irish mind and what they might have associated with it.

As I previously mentioned, these hazelnuts are also connected with the concept of *imbas*.[578] We have already seen that this concept of *imbas* is connected to the notions of illumination and "fire in the water".[579] This *imbas* is connected with poetic skills through its appearance alongside the skills received by Finn after tasting the salmon of Fec's pool.[580] These skills are *teinm laeda*, *imbas forosnai*, and *dichetul dichennaib*.[581] Nagy gives an example of another divination practice similar in name to the latter, *díchetal di chennaib coll* or "incantation from the tips of hazel".[582] This would once again re-connect this poetic knowledge to the hazel tree, similar to how *imbas* connects the hazel to knowledge in the "well" stories. Nagy also connects these *chennaib coll* (tips of hazel) back to nuts of *imbas* and the idea that the tips of the hazel may represent the nuts which hang at the tips of a tree.[583]

Moreover, the "musical" knowledge of *teinm laéda* also appears in connection with the nuts of knowledge in *Tir Tairngiri* where the husks of the hazels are said to be melodious.[584] This term is sometimes translated as "the chewing of the pith".[585] If pith refers to the inside of a hazelnut, this could also link *teinm laéda* to the consumption of hazelnuts. Hazelnuts could thus be thoroughly connected to all forms of knowledge, more so than salmon. Significantly, the salmon from *Sinann II* are also consuming the nuts of *imbas*.[586] If these salmon are related at all to the salmon from the *Macgnímartha*

[578] P.23 above.
[579] Ford 1974, p.73.
[580] "Boyish Exploits" p.186.
[581] See also the discussion of these terms in chapter 3.
[582] "Liminality and Knowledge", p.136.
[583] "Liminality and Knowledge", p.138.
[584] "Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise", p.214.
[585] O'Rahilly 1971, p.337-338.
[586] Gwynn 1913, p.292-295

it would appear that this salmon is more significantly a vessel for the knowledge of the hazelnuts, as opposed to being symbolic of knowledge on its own.

Other animals

The salmon in Irish literature is not uniquely associated with knowledge. Cross' index shows that other animals, beside salmon, have prophetic and truth telling qualities, especially crows and other birds.[587] We have already seen in the previous chapter that birds are also strongly associated with the motif of "the oldest animal". Moreover, if we follow a comparison that Heinrich Wagner makes between Celtic and Hindu mythology we see that wisdom in water, which in Hindu mythology is also connected with poetry, is associated with birds.[588] Wagner also suggests that ravens in Celtic literature are a symbol of a Celtic god of water and wisdom.[589] It may also be noted that in *Tir Tairngiri* the roof of the house in which Cormac finds the well of wisdom is thatched with feathers.[590] I will add that these feathers are described as white and function more as a fantastical description of the location, rather than being specifically connected to the well in question. Though, it also appears that in Cormac's Glossary there is a reference to a type of dress that the poets used to wear, *tuigen*, made up of white and multi-coloured feathers.[591] While I do not believe this necessarily proves that birds, or specifically ravens, were symbols of wisdom in Irish literature, it does show that birds appear in association with knowledge in Irish literature. Certainly, it is possible that several animals carry similar associations. Birds and salmon could both have associations with the same type of wisdom. It is also possible for one animal to be representative of several different symbols.

One other animal which appears to have an association with knowledge is the honeybee.[592] According to A.J. Hughes bees' association with knowledge shows from the term *Beach Eoluis* which could be translated as bee of knowledge.[593] Pádhraic Ó Ciardha claims that the idea of a bee of

[587] Cross 1952 p.60.
[588] Wagner 1975, p.1.
[589] Wagner 1975, p.8.
[590] "Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise", p.213.
[591] O'Donovan 1868, p.160.
[592] Monaghan 2004, p.39.
[593] Hughes 1996, p.22.

knowledge is grounded in medieval notions of the life of bees.[594] Like salmon, bees were also associated with one of the major food sources in Ireland, honey. Moreover, bees were generally regarded in a positive light in Ireland.[595] Bees even appear directly associated with a hazel tree, which stands over an otherworldly well dropping nuts into the water, in the early modern Irish story of *Echtra Airt meic Cuind*.[596]

There is another animal that has significant wisdom associations even if it, unlike the bee, is never referred to as such. Namely, the producer of the other important food source in Ireland: the cow. Bulls and cows are frequent participants in Irish stories. The bull of *dun culigne* is even said to be one man reincarnated several times, in a similar fashion to Tuan and Fintan.[597] In chapter 4, we have already come across the story of Carrol O'Daly, who is said to have received knowledge from the milk of a special cow.[598] Furthermore, if we believe that the name for Boand is derived from a divine goddess of cows, then perhaps her association with the wisdom giving waters of the Boyne also points to some association between milk and wisdom.[599] The origin of Finn's name as white may even be in association with milk, thus strengthening the connection between the milk like wisdom giving waters of the Boyne.[600] Ó hÓgáin also makes this connection.[601] Moreover, Bulls and cows are often referred to as sacred creatures in the Celtic and Irish world-view.[602] I do not mean to suggest that bulls, cows, or milk should be interpreted with wisdom qualities more often. What I do wish to suggest is that the frequency of the appearance of bovine creatures and milk products in Irish stories, without them necessarily representing anything, may be mirrored by the frequency of the appearance of the salmon.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that the salmon was not uniquely associated with knowledge. Moreover, in the situations where a salmon might have been associated with knowledge it was always

[594] Ó Ciardha 1980, p.117.
[595] Mac Coitir 2015, p.183.
[596] Best 1907, p.157.
[597] Berresford Ellis 1987, p.200.
[598] Ó hÓgáin 1990, p.335.
[599] Beck 2015, p.289.
[600] Beck 2015, p.290.
[601] Ó hÓgáin 1988, p.68-69.
[602] Ross 1968, p.302-308.

in connection with other symbols of knowledge. As such it is likely that the salmon in these instances is not the most important aspect of these tales. For example, if the salmon appears as the inhabitant of a magic waterway, the magical knowledge of that water might perhaps be more significant than the magical knowledge of the salmon. The salmon may only be a witness to knowledge instead of being representative of knowledge.

I would encourage the consideration that the salmon may frequently appear in relation to elements of knowledge but that this on its own does not necessarily make the salmon a creature of knowledge. Moreover, knowledge is not an exclusive attribute to the salmon. Nagy even identifies a tale where there are apparently hurdles of knowledge, *clíatha fis*, that a poet uses in a divination ritual.[603] It thus becomes apparent that this attribute of "of knowledge" is either common, not highly significant, or situationally given. It does not necessarily have to be a fixed notion. Therefore, the idea that the salmon was strongly and singularly associated with knowledge, cannot stand without question.

[603] *Liminality and Knowledge* 1981, p.138.

8. Was There a Salmon of Knowledge?

It is not my intention to argue that there is no evidence for a salmon of knowledge, because there is. The term *eó fis* does exist in medieval material and within texts such as the *Macgnímartha* a version of a knowledge providing salmon can be found. It is however my intention to argue that the evidence for an established concept of a salmon of knowledge is disproportionately small compared to the scholarly references made to this concept. From existing scholarship, it would appear like an indisputable fact that the salmon of knowledge exist and is widely referenced in Irish literature.[604] However, as I have shown, the basis for this assumption is not to be found in the actual extant medieval material.

Within the medieval texts in our corpus we can indeed see some evidence for a salmon of knowledge, mostly in our "well" stories. We have discussed this evidence in chapter 2. In later texts such as *Feis Tighe Conain* the term *eó fis* even appears in relation to how Finn received his wisdom. The fact that this text disputes the fact that Finn got his wisdom from a salmon shows that the idea of the salmon of knowledge already existed before the extant version of *Feis*. The author of *Feis* was at least aware of a version of how Finn got his wisdom that he felt the need to dispute. The text in which we then find the story of how Finn got his wisdom from a salmon is found in the earlier twelfth century *Macgnímartha*.[605] The connection between these tales points to the existence of at least one tradition regarding Finn that proposed he got his wisdom specifically from a salmon, a salmon of knowledge. The problem is that this is where our conclusive evidence ends.

In the connection with other tales, our evidence is severely lacking. We have seen in chapter 2 that the salmon of knowledge is often connected to the Segais and to the Dindshenchas of Sinann. However, the salmon in the *Macgnímartha* is only ever referred to as the salmon of *Linn Feic*, the Segais is never mentioned. Moreover, in *Feis* the salmon of knowledge is specifically separated from the Segais.[606] Thus, it is not at all sure whether the wisdom giving salmon from the *Macgnímartha* and *Feis* originates from the Segais. In *Senbecc* the catching of the salmon of Fec and the meeting of Senbecc from the Segais both occur on the Boyne. However, the salmon caught by Cú Chulainn is specifically

[604] Beck 2015, p.290.
[605] "Boyish Exploits", p.195.
[606] Joynt 1936, p.41.

said to be from a different place than Senbecc. The salmon originates from the pool of *Linn Feic* and Senbecc originates from the Segais.[607] While, as argued by Nagy, there may be a parallel between the caught salmon and the caught Senbecc, it can also not be denied that they do come from two different places in the context of this tale.[608] Therefore, while the Segais may be related to the Dindshenchas of Boand and Sinann it is not necessarily related to the same salmon from the *Macgnímartha*. Yet, that is how the story has often been treated.

The relationship between hazelnuts, *imbas*, and knowledge is much stronger than the relationship between salmon and knowledge. This becomes apparent in tales such as *Tir Tairngiri* and the Dindshenchas of Sinann where the salmon are more parts of activating the knowledge in the hazelnuts then active elements of knowledge themselves.[609] As such we cannot conclude that the salmon is specifically and especially a symbol of knowledge, more than for example water or hazelnuts. Here, I agree with Nagy's conclusion that the salmon may represent a carrier of wisdom rather than being a creature of innate wisdom.[610]

The evidence for the salmon of knowledge in the tales of the "old salmon" is even scarcer. While these tales do seem to involve wise men that have transformed into salmon, that seems to be the extent of the salmon in this context. In chapter 2 we have seen that even the motif of the "oldest animal" may not entirely be applicable to these tales. A salmon is part of this list of animal transformations, but because so many other things are also part of this sequence it is hard to isolate the salmon as being specifically connected with knowledge. There are stories where the salmon truly is the oldest animal. This occurs in the Medieval Welsh tale *Cullwch ac Olwen* and the later tale of *The adventures of Leithin*. But these tales do not provide evidence for the motif in medieval Irish literature. Furthermore, the role of a salmon within the motif of "the oldest animal" may simply have been as prominent fish completing a roster of sky, earth, and water animals. Thus, the evidence presented for the existence of the salmon as the oldest animal in medieval Irish literature is very thin.

[607] "Irish Miscellanies", p.183.
[608] "Otter, Salmon, and Eel", p.128.
[609] We discussed this in chapter 5 above.
[610] "Otter, Salmon and Eel" p.127.

I believe this is one of the greatest issues currently in scholarship relating to the salmon of knowledge: a habit of associating story elements too easily and freely. If we only see the salmon as a symbol of knowledge it will massively impede the way in which we can and will interpret these texts. We might even run the risk of wrongly attributing elements of knowledge to certain tales that do not have those. As we have seen in chapter 6, there is much more to the salmon than knowledge. In other stories we have seen that the salmon may represent valour, courage, or strength, and be representative of heroic attributes.[611] This may sometimes represent knowledge, but certainly not always.

Even so, arguing that a salmon was associated with much more than knowledge is not the same as arguing that there was no salmon of knowledge. However, when one compares the evidence for a symbolic connection between salmon and heroism to salmon and knowledge, one can doubt the prominent place the salmon of knowledge supposedly held.[612] At the very least it makes us wonder whether the salmon of knowledge was as much an established concept as the current scholarship makes it out to be. There is some evidence that in certain stories the idea of the salmon of knowledge is used and implied, but there are also many appearances of salmon that have nothing to do with knowledge and wisdom. We cannot take a handful of allusions as evidence for a common and established concept.

On the other hand, one could argue that the relative absence of the salmon of knowledge might prove the existence of the salmon of knowledge as an established concept. References to the term *eó fis* in *Beannact, a Bruin, ar Brigit* and *Feis* appear in a context where it is expected of the reader to understand the reference. The salmon of knowledge must at least be somewhat known then. The fact that we do not find a distinct origin story of the salmon of knowledge might be because the concept of the salmon of knowledge was so widespread that the medieval audience did not need and explanation. However, based on the type of references we get, I do not believe that that is likely. The reference in *Feis* is trying to dispute a concept, but that only shows that the Fenian tradition is scattered. Moreover, the term *eó fis* in *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit*, need not be conclusive evidence for the existence of the salmon of knowledge in the wider corpus of medieval Irish literature.[613]

[611] Discussion from p.57 above.
[612] Hughes 1996, p.18.
[613] We have discussed this on p.72.

Even if the salmon was associated with knowledge there is no reason to assume it was associated with pagan knowledge. The Christian elements and association with Jesus Christ might give the salmon connotations with religious wisdom. The two sages Tuan and Fintan both ascribe to the truth of Christianity. Tuan especially is represented in a Christian context.[614] I believe this Christian element could certainly help to provide new interpretations for the appearance of salmon not previously considered.

Moreover, we have seen that other elements usually associated with the salmon of knowledge, such as water, springs, and hazelnuts, may in fact be more significantly connected with knowledge than the salmon. The salmon's connection with knowledge may even hinge on these elements. There are also other animals in Irish literature that are associated with wisdom other than salmon. As we saw in the previous chapter, the evidence for a salmon of knowledge is not necessarily much greater than the evidence for an established concept of the bee of knowledge or wisdom bearing bovines. It could be argued that comparisons between the possible wisdom qualities of honey and milk, and the connection of these foods with a salmon, might strengthen the associations between salmon and wisdom. This may be so, but I would prefer to use this comparison to point to the possibility that the salmon is not associated with knowledge. That, like cows, salmon can represent a variety of meanings in different contexts that do not necessarily have to be wisdom or knowledge.

Still, I do believe that some sort of notion of a salmon of knowledge can be found in later Irish texts. I believe it is feasible that the concept of the salmon of knowledge only gained wider popularity at the end of the medieval period. It is entirely possible that a version of the salmon of knowledge tradition did already exist but was known only in a small part of Ireland, particularly Connacht. The text of *Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit* is from the book of Úi Maine from Connacht.[615] The reason the later *Feis* then had to dispute the idea of the salmon of knowledge was because a new concept of how Finn acquired his wisdom was gaining ground in Ireland, a concept disagreeable to the author of *Feis*. However, that would not explain why a western text like the *Acallam* does not include a reference to

[614] Meyer 1879, p.294.
[615] For the manuscript reference see the van Hamel codex: https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Beannacht,_a_Bruin,_ar_Brigit for the origin of the manuscript see K. M. 1943. p.192.

it.[616] Later uses of the term *eó fis* certainly make it likely that the concept only gained wider recognition at the end of the Middle Ages.

One thing is clear, considering the medieval evidence, we regard the salmon as too much of an established concept. From scholarly discussion, and in the popular mind, it appears that any salmon in medieval Irish literature is the salmon of knowledge.[617] It is the first, and sometimes only, explanation for why a salmon appears in a tale. This idea is at the very least exaggerated by scholarship. I would wish for scholars to take a step back and consider the fact that there might never have been an established salmon of knowledge, or that it developed later. This would allow for a wider interpretation of tales, and of the salmon itself. Interpretations that, in my opinion, are sometimes more correct.

One, perhaps minor detail, that I would also urge is to change the notion that this supposed sacred salmon of knowledge is known as *eó fis*.[618] *Eó fis* is by no means a standardized term nor does it appear in the texts we usually qualify as the foundational texts of the salmon of knowledge mythos, the *Macgnímartha* and the Dindshenchas of Sinann. Claiming that the salmon of knowledge was known as *eó fis* creates the idea that there is a standardized version of this motif that was widely known. As this thesis has shown, that is simply not the case.

As a Celtic scholar I set out to learn more about the salmon of knowledge, but the deeper I went into my research the further this mythical fish swam away from me. I started with the notion that there was a salmon of knowledge prominently present in Irish literature. Now, I am left with the notion that the salmon of knowledge is only prominent in Irish scholarship not in medieval literature. I hope this research might recontextualize the salmon of knowledge somewhat. In the future we may take a step-back, review the extant evidence, and allow for wider interpretation of when salmon do appear. We might also reconsider the importance of other elements, such as water and hazelnuts, in association with knowledge. These elements are currently connected to the salmon of knowledge, but they may reveal their own separate connections and associations with knowledge in medieval Irish literature. Hopefully,

[616] Dooley 2004, p.108.
[617] We have discussed this in chapter 5.
[618] Ross 1968, p.350.

this will allow us to better understand the role that salmon play in Irish literature without always first pointing to a salmon of knowledge.

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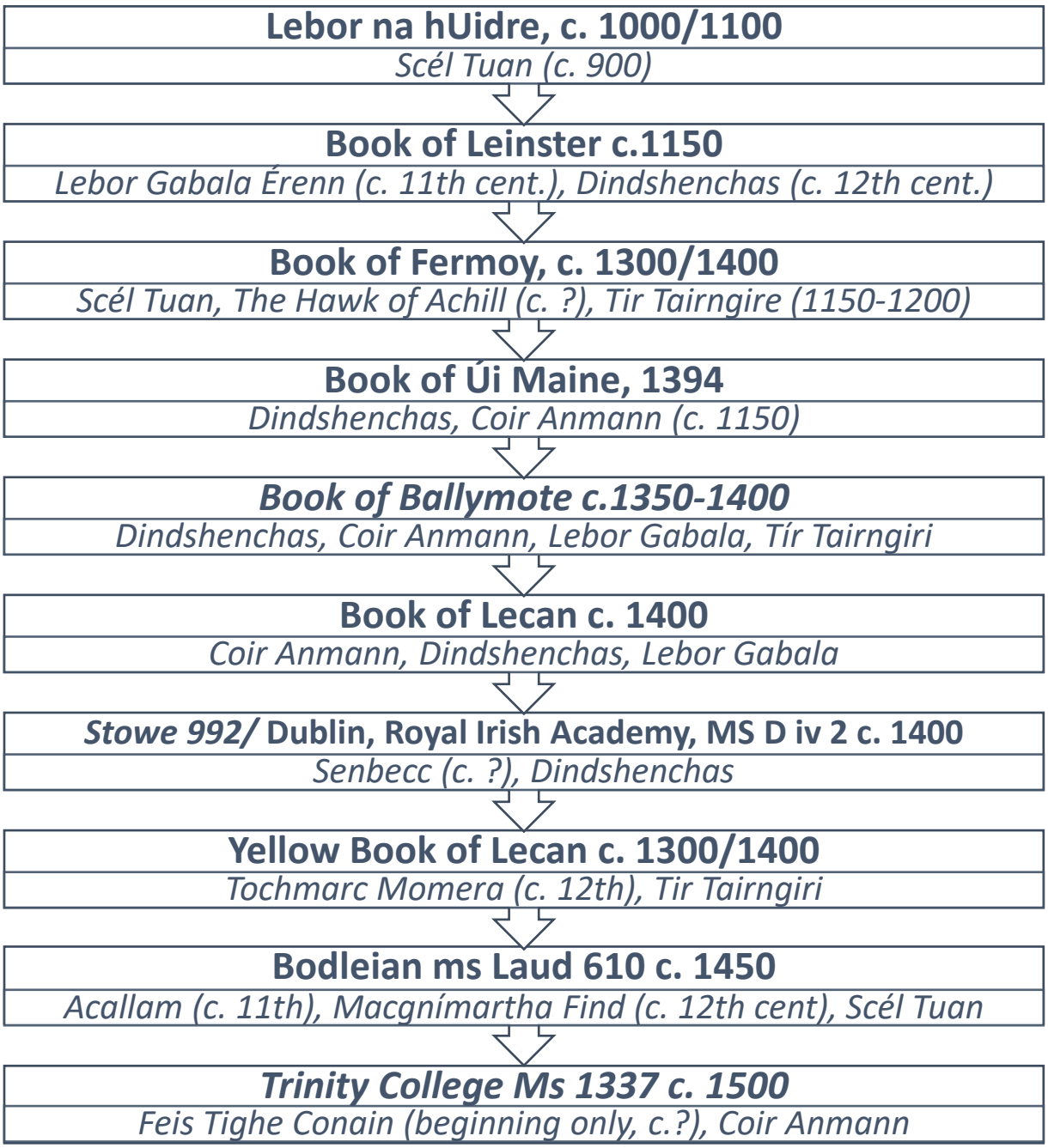
Appendix

Table 1, Manuscript Context


Lebor na hUidre, c. 1000/1100
Scél Tuan (c. 900)
Book of Leinster c.1150
Lebor Gabala Érenn (c. 11th cent.), Dindshenchas (c. 12th cent.)
Book of Fermoy, c. 1300/1400
Scél Tuan, The Hawk of Achill (c. ?), Tir Tairngire (1150-1200)
Book of Úi Maine, 1394
Dindshenchas, Coir Anmann (c. 1150)
Book of Ballymote c.1350-1400
Dindshenchas, Coir Anmann, Lebor Gabala, Tír Tairngiri
Book of Lecan c. 1400
Coir Anmann, Dindshenchas, Lebor Gabala
Stowe 992/ Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2 c. 1400
Senbecc (c. ?), Dindshenchas
Yellow Book of Lecan c. 1300/1400
Tochmarc Momera (c. 12th), Tir Tairngiri
Bodleian ms Laud 610 c. 1450
Acallam (c. 11th), Macgnímartha Find (c. 12th cent), Scél Tuan
Trinity College Ms 1337 c. 1500
Feis Tighe Conain (beginning only, c.?), Coir Anmann

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1. *Oskamp 1966, p.135. Nutt "The Voyage of Brann" 1897, p.81.*
2. *Dooley and Roe 1999, p.ix. Dillon 1956, p.63, though Scowcroft actually dates the tradition of the Lebor Gabála in the late ninth century Poppe 2009, p.216. Bowen 1975/76, p.116.*
3. Todd 1870, p.4. The Hawk of Achill has not been dated. Hull 1949, p.871.
4. Arbuthnot 2001, p.285. Arbuthnot 2001, p.286.
5. Hull 1949, p.871 and Dooley and Roe 1999, p.ix, both date the Book of Ballymote.

6. Hull 1949, p.871.
7. Meyer ‘Irish Miscellanies’ 1870, p.173. *Senbecc* as a tale has not been dated.
8. Hull 1930, p.73. Kudenko 2019, p.8.
9. Ó Cróinín 2002, p.235. Dooley 2004, p.98. Meyer 1881-1883, p.195.
10. Joynt 1936, p.iii. The text of Feis Tighe Conain has not been dated.

Table 2, Wisdom and Knowledge Terms[619]

text	Term (standard-ized)	Literal translation by eDIL	Manuscript of the edition text	How it is translated	What it means in context	Notes
Tuan	*fáith*	Prophet or seer	Leabhar na hUidre (Nutt 1897 p.77)	Seer (Meyer *Tuan mac Cairill's story* 1897 p.300)	Tuan has seen all history and can thus relate it, but he also seems to have the ability to prophesize and predict the future.	The wording of the text seems consistent throughout the different manuscripts by Meyers edition.
Acallam	*eolas*	knowledge, information, esp. knowledge gained by experience or practice, acquaintance/ guidance, knowledge of a way	Manuscripts from 1400-1500 (Stokes "Acallamh na senórach" 1900, p.70)	Knowledge, but also as learning and true lore (Dooley and Roe 1999, p.76/ 82/101)	This seems to be knowledge gained through experience.	*Fessa* (a form of *fis*) is used alongside *eolas* to express the knowledge learned by important poets. (Stokes 1900, 98)
Acallam	*oires*	History, knowledge or record of events	Manuscripts from 1400-1500(Stokes "Acallamh na senórach" 1900, p.40)	Wisdom (Dooley and Roe 1999, p.45)	A judgement call is asked of Finn he must give advice and also consult his tooth of wisdom.	
Acallam	*fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Manuscripts from 1400-1500(Stokes "Acallamh na senórach" 1900, p.40)	Wisdom in the case of wisdom tooth, knowledge in other places (Dooley and Roe 1999, p.44-45)	Information seems to be its most all-encompassing meaning. Used in both the context of the tooth of wisdom as well as the knowledge gained after hearing a tale.	*Fís* can be a vision. Fis is also used in the phrase knowledge of heaven (Dooley and Roe, 152).
Acallam	*Ollaman*	An ollave, the highest grade of `fili' (in O.Ir. ollam may have denoted an office as much as a grade of learning;)	Manuscripts from 1400-1500(Stokes "Acallamh na senórach" 1900, p.95)	Sage (Dooley and Roe 1999, p.101)	It seems to mean the function of great poet.	In their notes Dooley and Roe elaborate on their translation saying that Ollam should be understood as a high-ranking poet.

[619] A quick note here that I have only collected the terms of wisdom and knowledge that are relevant in the context of this research, especially in the larger text many different terms are used that do not necessarily relate to our considerations of the salmon of knowledge.

Lebor Gabála	*ecna*	Wisdom, knowledge, enlightenment, intelligence, skill	Manuscripts from c. 1150 to 1400 (Macalister vol I 1938, p.xi.)	Wisdom (Macalister 1938 p.61 Vol I) Knowledge (Macalister 1956 p.553 Vol v)	Used in religious contexts, perhaps leaning to enlightenment.	*Ecna* and fis are used in what seem to be similar religious contexts. Has music associations.
Lebor Gabála	*fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Manuscripts from c. 1150 to 1400	Translated as wisdom, knowledge and science (Macalister 1939, p.119 vol II, 1941, p.169 vol IV)	Seems to be used most for learned knowledge, whether religious or secular.	*Fesa* is also translated as skill. A form is also used for the tree of knowledge but also for diabolic knowledge of magic and Druidry.
Lebor Gabála	*eolas*	knowledge, information, esp. knowledge gained by experience or practice, acquaintance/ guidance, knowledge of a way	Manuscripts from c. 1150 to 1400	Knowledge and science (Macalister 1938 p.39 vol I, 1941 p.107 vol IV)	It is used with learning and thus leans more to the acquired knowledge definition.	
Metrical Dindshenchas	*Rús*	knowledge	Mainly 12th century manuscripts book of Leinster (Gwyn 1913, p.vi)	Knowledge (Gwyn 1913 vol 3 p. 131)	Is used for a nut of knowledge and contrasted with *amros*, ignorance or bad knowledge.	The words here are important because they explain the place name *Cnamrossa* but is also used in other places
Metrical Dindshenchas	*fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Mainly 12th century manuscripts book of Leinster	Knowledge (Gwyn 1913 p.315)	Instructed knowledge.	Used as *fessa.*
Metrical Dindshenchas	*Eol/eolach*	knowing, learned, skilled (in), acquainted with	Mainly 12th century manuscripts book of Leinster	Knowledge (Gwyn 1913, p.439)	This type of knowledge seems to be connected with music and with the word *ceol.*	
Metrical Dinshenchas	*gáes*	sagacity, intelligence, acuteness	Mainly 12th century manuscripts	Wisdom	Wisdom as in having a clear mind, so perhaps	Used twice.

			book of Leinster	(Gwyn 1913, p.227)	intelligence would fit better here.	
Metrical Dindshenchas	*Imbas*	great knowledge; poetic talent, inspiration; fore-knowledge Referring especially to knowledge or fore-knowledge obtained by magic or occult means or by poets	Mainly 12th century manuscripts book of Leinster	Magic Lore (Gwyn 1913, p.287)	Considering the fact that poetry and music are invoked I would almost lean toward inspiration as the proper translation.	Gwyn provides a different translation of the word in connection with the bubbles. *bolca immaiss* becomes mystic bubbles. And later he translates it as mystic again (p.289)
Metrical Dindshenchas	*Éicse*	Divination, wisdom, the profession of a seer, revelation, lore, poetic learning or skill, poetic profession.	Mainly 12th century manuscripts book of Leinster	Lore (Gwyn 1913, p.289)	Used here in combination with ceol, Ceol-Eicse. As such some musical learning seems to be implied.	
Bodleian	*imbas*	great knowledge; poetic talent, inspiration; fore-knowledge Referring especially to knowledge or fore-knowledge obtained by magic or occult means or by poets	Based on the Bodleian Dindshenchas with passages added	Knowledge (Stokes "Bodleian" 1892, p.497) Later as lore (Stokes 1892, p.498)	It is interesting that it is sued with a form of Eicse here. That might strengthen the idea of poetic knowledge or perhaps even knowledge of seers.	Used in combination with Eicsi. *immais n-eicsi*
Bodleian	*Eicse*	Divination, wisdom, the profession of a seer, revelation, lore, poetic learning or skill, poetic profession.	Based on the Bodleian Dindshenchas with passages added (Stokes 1892, p.465)	Knowledge (Stokes 1892, p.497)		

Bodleian	*Sruth frithrosc*		Based on the Bodleian Dindshenchas with passages added	Is translated as "well of knowledge" by stokes (1892, p.498)		I find the actual meaning of this obscure. *Sruth* does not necessarily mean well it is more often used for a stream.
Bodleian	*sous*	knowledge, science, learning, poetic lore	Based on the Bodleian Dindshenchas with passages added	Knowledge (Stokes 1892, p.498)		
Bodleian	*Fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Based on the Bodleian Dindshenchas with passages added	Knowledge (Stokes 1892, p.506)	Without Knowledge as in without their awareness.	Not found in the context of our tales.
Rennes	*rus*	knowledge	Based mainly on the Rennes manuscript with passaged added (Stokes 1894, p.272)	Knowledge (Stokes 1894, p.334)		The form used is *ros*, once again to explain *Cnamrossa*
Rennes	*eicse*	Divination, wisdom, the profession of a seer, revelation, lore, poetic learning or skill, poetic profession.	Based mainly on the Rennes manuscript with passaged added	Wisdom (Stokes 1894, p.320/457)	Used elsewhere in the *Bodleian* next to *filidecht* and thus poetry.	Used similarly to the *Bodleian* versions in combination with *Imbas*. *imbois na heics*
Rennes	*imbas*	great knowledge; poetic talent, inspiration; fore-knowledge Referring especially to knowledge or fore-knowledge obtained by magic or occult means or by poets	Based mainly on the Rennes manuscript with passaged added	Inspiration (Stokes 1894, p.457)		Consistently translated here.
Rennes	*sous*	knowledge, science,	Based mainly on the Rennes	Wisdom		Like the *Bodleian* the

		learning, poetic lore	manuscript with passaged added	(Stokes 1894, 457)		form here is *soas*.
Hawk	*Eolach*	knowing, learned, skilled (in), acquainted with	Book of Fermoy, 14th/15th century (Meyer "The colloquy between Fintan and the hawk of Achill" 1907, p.24)	Knowing one (Runge 2020, II)	It is used as an attribute of Fintan.	
Hawk	*Run*	Something hidden or occult, a mystery, a secret, secret intentions, sometimes knowledge	Book of Fermoy, 14th/15th century	Knowledge (Runge 2020, xxxiv)	"Secrets" to me seems to be a pretty good meaning as Fintan has related the details of his life.	
Hawk	*fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Book of Fermoy, 14th/15th century	Knowledge (Stanza 2020, xxxv)	In context the meaning once again seems to lean to information.	Used for the knowledge of the hawk.
Coir Anmann	*Eicsi/Eicse*	Divination, wisdom, the profession of a seer, revelation, lore, poetic learning or skill, poetic profession.	H 3 18 Trinity college 15th/16th century (third recension Stokes "Coir Anmann"1897, p.286-287)	Wisdom (Stokes "coir Anmann" 1897, 403)	It is connected with the spirit of poetry in this section	While *eicsi* is used it is not used in any context near to salmon or water. A term for knowledge appears but only in compound form.
Macgnímartha	*fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Lebahar Rátha 1453-1454 (Meyer Magcnímartha Find 1882, p.195)	Knowledge (Meyer "Boyish Exploits" 1907, 186)	The context is almost strange. The type of knowledge Finn receives seems to be in line with learned knowledge of the poets. (such as *Teinm Laéda*) Yet he gets the "information"/knowledge without having to actively learn it.	
Macgnímartha	*imbas*	great knowledge; poetic talent, inspiration;	Laud 610 1453-1454	Knowledge which illuminates	Used in connection with *Forosnai* so illumination is clear. It is also used as part of poetic skills.	Used as one of the things that Finn learned as part of poetry.

		fore-knowledge Referring especially to knowledge or fore-knowledge obtained by magic or occult means or by poets		(Meyer 1907, p.186)		According to eDIL these two words (*immas Forosnai*) are often used in combination)
Feis	*Fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Mainly based on the H 4. 14 manuscript 17th century. (Joynt 1936, p.iii-iv)	fore-knowledge (O'Kearney 1855, p.173)	Is used as general knowledge but also in relation to a salmon.	The medieval manuscript only preserves the beginning. It is thus very likely that the use of *eó fis* is not found in the earlier manuscript. Though that manuscript does contain the boyhood deeds.
Feis	*Eolas*	knowledge, information, esp. knowledge gained by experience or practice, acquaintance/ guidance, knowledge of a way	Mainly based on the H 4. 14 manuscript 17th century.	Wisdom (O'Kearney 1855, p.173)	Used here as "true wisdom" in combination with foreknowledge.	The true knowledge here, like, foreknowledge refers to Finn's knowledge and visions of the truth.
Momera	*fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Part of the yellow book of lecan 14th 15th century (Nuijten 2016, p.7)	Knowledge (Nuijten 2016, p.36)	Here it does seem to be referring to a piece of information again.	None of these forms necessarily relate to the salmon passage.
Momera	*rus*	knowledge	Part of the yellow book of lecan 14th 15th century	Vision (Nuijten 2016, p.43)	Because it is used next to *fis* it might be his knowledge of this information or of his inquiry.	My context here is aided by the fact that the text later reveals that this information has been

						obtained by a vision.
Momera	*fáitsine*	Prophesying; a prophecy, an augury	Part of the yellow book of lecan 14th 15th century	Vision (Nuijten 2016, p.43)	Prophecy seems fitting because it regards information about the future.	Used with *fessa*, a form of *fis*.
Tir Tairngiri	*fis*	the act of finding out or ascertaining; knowledge, information	Edition based on recension I Ballymote 1384x1406 and YBL 14th and 15th century (Stokes "Cormac's Adventure" 1891, p.183)	Knowledge (Stokes 1891, p.216)	Used in association with "the folk of many arts".	No words for wisdom in the translation. Streams of the senses are connected here.
Senbecc	Segais	Literally a well or spring. May refer to the more metaphorical wellspring of poetry and inspiration	Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2 (992)	Has not previously been translated	Here it may refer to both a place and a metaphorical spring of knowledge.	I take it as the place Segais, but with the metaphorical meaning of wellspring of poetry very closely connected.